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# Body talk: perceptions of the body and performative roles in Japanese anime, as seen through Scum's Wish

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Body Talk: Perceptions of the Body and  
Performative Roles in Japanese Anime,  
As Seen Through *Scum's Wish*

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Spring 2018

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## Preface: Reasonings to Dive Into

When I first watched the Japanese anime *Scum's Wish* (JPN: *Kuzu no Honkai*),<sup>1</sup> it made me think about how each character perceives their body in relation to the world as opposed to just blindly enjoying it. It made me think of the body and the illusions that come with it, for example, when a young woman dresses up a certain way to elicit a certain reaction. Due to the patriarchal society in Japan, the body needs to keep adjusting to fashion standards and accepted perceptions tailored to men. Although there are breaks from the norm in an effort to reclaim the body and to manipulate others, the body is still gazed upon and judged. In having their bodies perceived and presented in different, multifaceted ways, the anime's characters either see themselves floating in the abyss of Japanese society, or in control of it all. But how in control are they really? In a society where women's bodies are dictated so heavily, freedom and particularly sexual freedom does not seem possible. To the teenagers in *Scum's Wish*, who are still developing their sexuality, they try so hard to be in control and deny their turbulent feelings and problems, while their bodies give their true personalities and desires away to the audience and other surrounding characters; their bodies and their inner feelings are in constant contradiction with each other.

*Scum's Wish* is an anime about Hanabi and Mugi, a high school couple, who look and act normal by fitting into the high school norm of after-school activities and honors classes. They give off the aura of average personalities, average wants, average life, when in actuality both parties are each in love with someone else—someone unattainable—and therefore use each other physically to fill the void. Because Hanabi and Mugi focus so much on filling the void, the show

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<sup>1</sup> The anime premiered January 12th, 2017 in Japan and ran until March 30th, 2017; Directed by Masaomi Ando. The original manga was created by Mengo Yokoyari.

places heavy emphasis on body language. But this anime does not only revolve around them. On the sidelines are the couple's true crushes and characters who are in love with Hanabi and Mugi separately. Throughout twelve episodes, all of the characters impose their will and desires upon each other in damaging ways by taking advantage of the fantasy in front of them that can impede on others' autonomy and ruin the relationship. Even though the characters say one thing, their bodies say something contradictory, and it is through the body that the truth can be interpreted. In an anime where everyone uses sex to some extent to avoid their deeper feelings and issues, their words are treated as a veil to their actions. The anime is filled with imagery that belies the true desires of all the characters involved and most of the information the audience gets is through these images. The main focus will be on the anime's usage of the body, in the sense that while it conveys the feelings left unsaid, at the same time, it is used to hide the character's true intentions.

This focus will be in an effort to understand where each character is coming from and what they do and why they do it and what that means in the long run and how that can impact society. Many of the events that occur in this show do not attempt to glorify human beings, but rather show the ugly side of people that has nothing to do with an external conflict such as saving the world or winning a volleyball tournament. Sometimes people are coarse for no reason and it cannot be explained. There are also times where it feels as if people need to hide their true face and portray themselves as better than they are. *Scum's Wish* holds a mirror up to the audience who is looking for another escapist anime to make them realize that the characters are just as ugly as them. For this reason, the anime will be treated as a social commentary.

The characters in *Scum's Wish* live up to the name of scum with distorted desires who are unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality, and for many parts of the show, do not care. Their bodies and what they do with it to gain power, love, or validation are the main indicators of their honest personalities and views of the world. They all project their desires and problems onto others for sex or physical comfort, which leads to their collective downfall, as by the end of the anime, most of the relationships horribly fall apart and are irreparable. There is the illusion that it will work itself out in the end, but it becomes the case that everything that was ever done is meaningless. The anime exposes the characters in a way they cannot ever come back from, and their bodies are what gave them away.

This thesis will be broken up into five sections: background information on Japanese anime and manga, the sexualization of the female body, the male gaze, cute culture and the perceptions of cuteness on women, which leads to; analysis of the first four episodes of *Scum's Wish*, which set up the conflicts encountered later on; analysis of the next seven episodes and the power dynamics of the various pairs of characters; analysis of the finale as well as the repercussions of actions made in the anime; and concluding remarks about the thesis. I would like to state that *Scum's Wish* is available for viewing on Amazon Prime Video, where timestamps will be used accordingly throughout this thesis. There will also be many mentions of “male,” “female,” and “two genders.” Japanese society follows a model that cares about heteronormativity and marginalizes LGBTQIA+ groups. My argument works only within that heteronormativity.

I would also like to make a few acknowledgments. This process has been long and tremendously fun, but I would like to thank Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase from the Japanese

Department and Michael Joyce from the English Department at Vassar College for their gracious time and guidance as I wrote this thesis, and my various Vassar friends for supporting my aspirations throughout the semester.

## Becoming Cute or Sexy: The Sexualization of Women through Various Media and Cultural Impact

Animation as a genre is diverse all around the world, from mystery, to action, to rom-com, to slice of life. There is a diverse cast of protagonists, ranging across ethnicities, personalities, and body types that generally includes male protagonists, while diverse female protagonists are far and few between in animation. Whenever there is a woman, most of the time she is the same type: thin, tall, beautiful, and extremely curvaceous. This is emphasized in Japanese animation; where excluding the world of *shōjo* manga,<sup>2</sup> women are treated as after-thoughts and only meant for the male gaze. In Japanese titles like *Urusei Yatsura* and *Dragon Ball Z*, the women are dressed in skimpy clothes and are only there to devote attention to their male counterparts. Even though the alien Lum from *Urusei Yatsura* is not seen by her male counterpart and the audience as the conventional Japanese obedient, passive woman, she is designed to not be the conventional Japanese woman to reinforce the idea that her personality type is unattractive to Japanese men. She is an abrasive, aggressive woman set on obtaining the affections of her crush on the male protagonist, Ataru, who for the most part does not appreciate her deviations from the norm.

The sexualization of women is also seen in video games; according to a 1998 survey, “21% [of video games were] depicting violence toward women. Twenty-eight percent of the games portrayed women as sex objects. Only 15% of the games portrayed women as heroic characters, and even those heroic roles were mostly sexualized or trivialized. In games with female characters, the females were most likely to be depicted as victims or as damsels in

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<sup>2</sup> *Shōjo*; meaning young girl. Manga of this nature is intended for a young female audience, as it is characterized with large, sparkly eyes, flowery backgrounds, and a romantic or emotional plot.



distress. Other common depictions included females portrayed as visions of beauty, as evil or obstacles to the game, and in devalued or insignificant roles” (Dill 116). From *Bayonetta* to the *Final Fantasy* series to *Saints Row*, women are either vulnerable damsels or highly sexualized side characters. Bayonetta, the protagonist in her own game, is highly sexualized, even though there is a stark lack of men in the games. Knowing that the game is for a largely male audience, the male gaze is still present, and *Scum’s Wish* capitalizes on the male gaze at certain points of the anime to convey critical information. Given the various facets of popular culture, such as contemporary music, anime, magazines, and advertising, women are seen as marginalized with no real autonomy or personality, and Japan profits off of treating women as such.

In *Scum’s Wish*, cuteness is highly important to the personalities the characters don and their relationships. In Japanese culture, there is the concept of *kawaii*, or cute, culture. Anything can be called cute, such as babies, pretty women, charming characters, the elderly, houses, cars (Shiokawa 94). *Kawaii* is used so often that it seems like a vague compliment. However, “by far the most outstanding feature of cuteness is its complete lack of anything observably threatening” (Shiokawa 94). This term is mostly used towards women and invariably, cute things are marketed towards them to make them seem more vulnerable. Because of this, the movement to hold women to an unrealistic ideal emerged: “The ideal woman is at once pet, child, partner, and feminine in appearance. In other words, the gynoid has no essence, no essential identity, other than that ascribed to her by men” (Lamarre 236). It mentions the gynoid, or female android, as the ideal woman because they are a blank slate, but is that not what Japanese men want for real women as well? Lamarre argues that Japanese society allows men to want to be the sole fountain of knowledge and habit-forming for women, and it is easier to do it for younger or more naïve

women, and project that this woman wants to attain it to perform upon men too. Never mind being physically mature with a real voice—high-pitched voices and smooth lines and large eyes are in.

This ideal for Japanese women is reflected in manga and anime. Heroines with large, starry eyes and small mouths became the norm around the 1960s, since the cuter a girl is, the more innocent and good they are (Shiokawa 101). Contrasted with a mature woman with a larger chest and hips, the audience automatically roots for the cute heroine because of her projected innocence and penchant for nostalgia (Shiokawa 105), which will be described in more detail during the *Scum's Wish* analysis. Now, the mature woman is seen as deadly and evil, pushing women to buy into the *kawaii* culture even more, leading to why “the Japanese fondness for cute goods is often viewed as a ‘cult of cuteness’” (Akita 44). Oftentimes it does feel like a cult to foreigners—Japanese girls and young women are aggressively calling things cute and even calling men cute to emasculate them. Everything is cute, and because of the thought that cute things are good, then it is another ideal that women have to strive for, which in turn pushes them to consume cute goods and embody cuteness to seem desirable to men, including Hello Kitty items and childish outfits like loose socks and platform shoes (Akita 45).

Now that they don a certain illusion, they can only act within the realm of that illusion, as seen here: “*Kawaii* objects are often worn as extensions of one’s body image, informing others of one’s own charming nature and how one would like to be considered in the social world” (Akita 46). Girls cannot act in the way that deviates from their appearance, because it gives mixed signals of how they want to be seen and therefore treated, weakening their control over their body. For example, if a girl is wearing a cute dress and goes out with her boyfriend, then

she cannot order a “masculine” item, such as black coffee, because it does not make sense for her projected self to do so. So eventually her order changes to ice cream instead, because it fits the fantasy of a cute girl eating a cute thing and a man can twist that image into the erotic (Akita 46). Therefore, girls appear to be locked into a specific sphere that they have created for themselves. Or is it really their creation?

Part of it is that men have forced this image on girls, and girls can choose how they project this image, which is why there are the various fads such as *ganguro* and *lolita*.<sup>3</sup> Men have created this system of thinking and women have no choice but to comply because of how patriarchal Japanese society is and women do not want to be ousted from society. It creates a very straining relationship between the two genders and how they impose their distorted desires, because “individualism is understood as selfishness...women are expected to support others to maintain a social harmony, *wa*, which is a norm created by men” (Akita 51). Although everyone is expected to conform, the social harmony prevents women from participating in conversations in any real way when it comes to sensitive topics, or any general topic, as they are treated by men as the only adhesive of keeping society together. Traditional Japanese belief systems see women as a “source of religious and spiritual awe,” and the notion of *kawaii* gives them a false sense of security in order to still deem Japanese women as unthreatening (Shiokawa 121). Women need to conform to social standards and men’s wants in order to be seen as a functioning member of society. If women veer off from the crowd too much, then there is the distaste that women do not think of the social harmony and therefore should be ostracized. The cuteness that

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<sup>3</sup> *Ganguro* refers to the fashion style of a dark tan and blonde hair and liberally applied makeup. It is to give the image of the quintessential American babe. *Lolita* refers to the style that is highly influenced by Victorian and Edwardian children's clothing from the Rococo period for the aesthetic of cuteness. This is unrelated to Vladimir Nabokov’s work of the same title.

is portrayed in media also helps in creating this oppressive atmosphere, because it gives men incentive to assume a myriad of things from girls without them putting in any real effort, seen here: “A beautiful, competent woman is *allowed* to be outstanding so long as she is ‘cute,’ whereas a beautiful, competent man is outstanding without putting any extra effort into appearing otherwise” (Shiokawa 121). Because cuteness and conforming is so prevalent in Japanese society, women are forced to accept their sexualization, and the only way they can try to escape is performing within the patriarchal system by using cuteness and other forms to empower themselves, even though it may eventually lead to pulling them back in the cycle.

Given that men love this ideal of cuteness, they now prefer more prepubescent body types in girls, as seen in *rorikon* manga.<sup>4</sup> Men love seeing young girls in media, not for “the age of the girl that is attractive, but a form of ‘cuteness’ that she represents” (Shigematsu 130). Yet contrary to the quote, I think the girl’s young age *is* another factor of this burgeoning fetishization. Thinking about men feverishly enabling this concept by consuming this sort of media is disturbing. Thinking about a businessman reading about a cute prepubescent girl and her adventures on the train so openly is disturbing (Shiokawa 114). Thinking about that same man buying *kawaii* or *rorikon* merchandise is disturbing because it normalizes the sexualization of young girls in real life. Once the desire, the fetish, transfers from the page to a real person with their own complex thoughts, is when women are further marginalized.<sup>5</sup> In Japan, there is a

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<sup>4</sup> *Rorikon*, or lolicon; short for lolita complex, due to Nabokov's infamous work.

<sup>5</sup> There is a Freud quote about the fetishist, where it is said that looking at a woman’s genitals is highly unsettling and men cannot handle it, because it reminds them of castration. In response, men focus on a different part of the female body to be interested in. Therefore, “in effect, the fetishist cannot accept the bare facts of sexuality to cover this naked or exposed truth with excessive adornment of the woman’s body, or obsessive attention to certain parts of the woman’s body, or both. Sexuality becomes organized around an idealized or fetishized part of the body, to the point where interest in the fetish replaces the genital sexuality altogether” (Lamarre 227).

practice called *enjo kōsai*, where junior and high school girls “date” older men for money to buy fancy consumer goods, which may well be more excessively cute things to make them seem more attractive to older men. This practice has so many layers to go through, because not only are girls buying into the *rorikon* culture that satisfies men’s desires, but they are also using the practice to feed their own capitalistic desires, becoming an endless cycle of pursuing fleeting consumer wants by enabling men. To be cute is strategically preferable, as it aids in a girl’s struggle for happiness in a society that tells them that they are meant to be men’s sidekick in all aspects, seen here: “The Japanese vision of the ‘cute’ female provides a strategic guideline for a girl child to benefit in a grossly imperfect world dominated by grown-up boys...it also deludes her into believing the relative importance of being ‘cute’” (Shiokawa 121). For example, women are less likely to be promoted in a workplace, forever stationed as an office lady, regardless of their superior qualifications and their longer employment. Even if a woman is working, Japanese society assumes it is only until she finds a man and gets married. And if she never gets married, then the male office workers see her as too career-oriented and undesirable. Women cannot win in modern Japanese society, as it forces them in specific pigeon holes in order to exist and function as a good cog in the ever-turning wheel.

The perception of loss of power for Japanese men causes the sexualization of young girls in popular culture. In recent decades, women have been given more power and mobility to focus on themselves and not only on men’s desires. They are getting married later and later, despite Japanese society’s dislike. Women are not solely focusing on the home, but their personal hobbies and aspirations, driving men to confusion because of this deviation from expectations; watching women do things for themselves and not for the male gaze are causing men to have an

identity crisis. Now that men are “confronted with more powerful and independent women, Japanese men have...[had the] growth of sexual interest in very young, non threatening girls,” further enabling men to consume *rorikon* products, such as body pillows, posters featuring young girls, figurines of young girls in sexual poses, and fan works called *doujinshi* starring young girls (Napier 80). There are many reactions to this new change—the further sexualization and infantilization in media to make women seem more vulnerable and unable to make their own decisions. This demeaning treatment is shown in recent anime such as *KonoSuba* and *Saekano*, where there is a lone male surrounded by beautiful girls who are unfailingly cute, thin, and innocent and their actions are always for the boy’s attention.<sup>6</sup> With the overwhelming amount of anime that follow this formula, it is clear that popular culture will cater to Japanese men, and Japanese women are going to be sexualized in a variety of ways to adhere to whatever standard society has placed upon them. Anime and manga are so pervasive in Japanese society, that they let men have these distorted desires that affect their perceptions of women and how they want and are meant to be treated. With the variety of stories that say that women are just a man’s ego booster such as *Sword Art Online*, *Gurren Lagann*, *Bungou Stray Dogs*, and *Fate/stay night*, men take it out on women in real life situations, as seen in the workplace mentioned earlier. With such bland male protagonists in anime who are constantly surrounded by beautiful women, men are allowed to assume that women will always fall head over heels for them, regardless of body type and intellect. That is a dangerous assumption to have, because it allows Japanese men to

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<sup>6</sup> Anime titles are short for *Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku o!* and *Saenai Hiron no Sodatekata*. *Saekano* is explicitly given the genre titles of *ecchi* (meaning playfully sexual in Japanese slang) and harem, while *KonoSuba* is given fantasy and comedy. Both have the same qualities of fanservice and harem.

impede on Japanese women's autonomy, and men's desire to be seen as a god to be fawned over by women is damaging to both genders.

One issue with anime is that men are allowed to be average, and yet be surrounded by tall pretty girls who are extraordinary. In *Urusei Yatsura*, Ataru is an average high school boy, with no special talents and no real hobbies or ambitions, who is somehow the world's champion at pushing back invading aliens and whom Lum chases relentlessly. In *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, Kyon is much like Ataru, a high school student who is mildly bored with life but has no special talents either. Yet somehow, Kyon finds himself surrounded by eccentric girls with special powers. A recurring question that comes up in the story is, why is Kyon here? The other characters are time travelers, or espers, or aliens, but Kyon is so...bland. He does nothing to serve the plot. Why is he in the center of this madness? This question is constantly brought up in the work among the characters, but an answer is never presented. The fact that no one can really answer is poignant, displaying that he is meant to be passed through the narrative so the male audience can embody him and experience the fantasy of being surrounded by special girls and have a false sense of superiority.

This further marginalizes Japanese women and the women characters in anime and manga into subservient roles and enables men to continue to push their distorted desires onto women. This trend of having a transparent male protagonist who men can embody very clearly affects real life. Recently in Japanese society, there has been a growing trend for effeminate guys instead of the more masculine, because "being manly is not popular now" (Napier 120). Guys are now in the midst of their own gender crises because women, due to the enforcing of their place in society, are beginning to lose attraction to that sort of man. Always getting pushed to the side,

always forced upon, women are tired of it in the modern age and cannot and do not want to handle that sort of baggage anymore. A 2013 Japanese survey says that “45% of women aged 16-24 ‘were not interested in or despised sexual contact’” (qtd. in Haworth, The Guardian.com). Therefore, as women are slowly coming to terms with their bodies, men are getting abandoned. That is why “Japanese women are more likely...to see marriage in negative terms” (Napier 120). Women are finding their independence without the presence of the male gaze, and now that they have a taste of what men have had all along—freedom—they refuse to let it go so quickly. They will relish in this newfound freedom, but it does come at a price: they are less likely to become promoted in the workforce, meaning that they would always be at a secretary position, even if they were more or as qualified as their male counterparts because of the continued expectation that a woman should get married.

Yet in spite of this, women continue to work to maintain their freedom. They are getting married later and later, and when they are sexually active, it is not with a Japanese man, rather a foreigner, seen here: “Wealthy and leisured young Japanese women travel to exotic locales to pursue...sexual liaisons...these liaisons were specifically not with Japanese men” (Napier 206). Japanese men are quickly losing their place in women’s lives and thus turn to manga and anime to get that sense of getting catered to, as seen in *rorikon* manga earlier. Men cannot adapt to this new way of life, this wave of feminine power that is not for the male gaze, so they continue to create works that feed their fantasies of being omnipresent in so many facets of life, because if they cannot have a real woman, then it can only be 2D.



Japanese men feeding their 2D fantasies is seen in an anime titled *Chobits*, a world where female persocoms are commonplace.<sup>7</sup> Even though these persocoms were made with innocent intentions, they are often used for sexual pleasure for men, creating a rift between men and women. It is such the case for one particular character, Ms. Shimizu, where “[Ms. Shimizu’s] husband became so obsessed with his female persocom that he simply ignored her” (Lamarre 226). There was once a video made highlighting otakus and their daily lives, where “it appeared safer and maybe truer to the situation to present male otaku as losers who cannot or will not date real women, preferring or merely settling for idealized porn images, fantasy narratives, and masturbatory pleasures” (Lamarre 248). It is imperative to recognize these trends anime and manga influence on Japanese society,<sup>8</sup> since it allows Japanese men to internalize the treatment of women in media, and society and media are interwoven so tightly, leading me towards the topic of sex in Japan.

There is the stereotype that Japanese people are sexually repressed. For the purposes of this thesis, I argue that it is true since there is such a great lack of sexual contact in Japanese society, to the point that men are called “herbivore men.” Ever since the 1990s, Japanese men are more content in staying at home and spurning the masculine roles the previous generation had to uphold. This also leads to no motivation for having a relationship with a real girl, now that computerized girls are more common (Harney, Slate.com). Due to this, pornography is deeply ingrained in modern society, especially child pornography, as the possession of owning child pornography was banned in 2014. Understanding that women are losing attraction to them, men

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<sup>7</sup> A persocom is an android that is made to help with human daily life, such as chores and running errands, or companionship.

<sup>8</sup> It is hard to clearly tell if manga and anime reflect Japanese society or influence. These mediums and society are so closely related that it can be hard to distinguish.

have to find other avenues to release their distorted desires that have been molded for so long. This affects manga and anime, as the female characters are either sexually fetishized young, cute girls, or sexually fetishized curvaceous women for the sake of fanservice. Their bodies are put on display for no reason that serves the plot, and the audience does not care about giving real substance to these female characters. All that matters is their bodies and the possibilities of what men can do with these bodies. And in the pornographic realm, male characters are either the comic voyeur or the aggressive demon ravaging women's bodies. The comic voyeur's "chief function seems to be to watch longingly from the sidelines," and the demon's function "is penetration of the female, both with the penis and with as many phallic substitutes as possible" (Napier 77, 79). Japanese men are exactly the comic voyeur trying to become the demon in reality. They cannot have sexual relations with women because women avoid them, and so their options are dwindling. They wish they were masculine so they can penetrate the female body, but the next best consolation is using media and tentacles to do so. In *Chobits*, the main protagonist, Hideki, is very clearly the comic voyeur. He cannot have sexual relations with Chii, the female persocom he found, because her reset button is found right between her legs. Due to the inability to have sexual contact, Hideki has to be sexually repressed and fantasizes about women constantly, to the point where "[Hideki] is constantly exposing his fantasies and humiliating himself" (Lamarre 226). Here, the man exposes his fantasies and his distorted desires...what does he expect to come out of that in saying it out loud? The woman—a woman, any woman—to comply?<sup>9</sup> Given the lack of communication, as the language only permits roundabout assertions, and given the popularity of sexualized female characters who pander to

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<sup>9</sup> Let it be noted that Chii is considered a "symptom of the man, of male desire," suggesting that women are only there to serve the male gaze (Lamarre 223).

the male audience, the two genders are at a stalemate. Neither can confront the issues that the other has, and therefore use manga and anime to convey their feelings. Men cannot cross the woman's threshold because of their self-imposed isolation, and women are already marginalized. How can they reconcile their issues? Women cannot be seen as a sacrificial victim to men's desires anymore, and men must calibrate and recognize that they are not meant to possess women's bodies. Japanese men are so surrounded with images of porn and women being ravished in media, that it needs to be talked about within anime.

### ***Scum's Wish: Analyzing the Set-up***

With the understanding of the dichotomy between the two genders in modern Japan, it is now time to talk about *Scum's Wish*. The basic premise is about two second-year high schoolers, Hanabi and Mugi, who seem like the perfect couple from the outside when in reality, they are not truly in love with each other. They both have their own unattainable crush on another and therefore date each other to fill the void in their hearts. In this anime, all of the characters involved use bodies—their own and others'—for two types of deception: deceiving others for selfish reasons; and deceiving themselves to avoid their problems. The double deception is a double-edged sword—this creates a violent cycle of hating how their body is always gazed upon in unwanted ways and therefore use other people's bodies to regain control of their own body, but when using other people's bodies backfire in ways they do not expect, they are back to hating their own body and flaws and the cycle begins again. This cycle shows that true satisfaction cannot be obtained through bodies and these characters are using bodies to attain things that are not bodily experiences.

Deep down, they want love, validation, emotional intimacy, but think that they can get it through the body, which is not true. The body is not a substitute for those deeper feelings. Every episode goes through the pattern of various pairs of characters, most ostensibly Hanabi and Mugi, deceptively using bodies in damaging ways and their sense of self and relationships falling apart because of the consequences that they do not think of. Even though the characters all seem to be self-aware, they still continue the violent cycle of manipulating others through deceiving themselves and use the body for connection and alienation. The show also deceives the audience through aesthetics of deception and perception—things seem one way when it is the exact

opposite. The audience sees things begin to go downhill and assume that the conflicts will become fixed, because Hanabi and Mugi seem so earnest in genuinely loving each other throughout the series, but the two different registers of communication, the body and the sounds they make—both sexual and normal dialogue—are rarely in sync, therefore confusing the audience and driving the character's relationships to fall apart. A large part of the deception and miscommunication is through a character's eyes, and whether they are shown or shrouded tell a lot about their hidden feelings and what they are trying to accomplish in that moment.

This anime right from the get-go talks about the sensitive topics that Japanese society in real life would not. The most prevalent question throughout the anime is whether love is truly worth the pain that the characters go through. Doubt about love shows up almost immediately in the first episode, where Hanabi says, "Hopeless love, painful love, unrequited love...are they really that beautiful? I don't think they are," after she rests her head on the teacher's lectern (Episode 1, 2:18).<sup>10</sup> Her thoughts about love foreshadow the actions everyone makes later on in the series, as they become increasingly damaging and manipulative, which will be discussed in later episodes. Whenever she thinks about her crush and homeroom teacher, Narumi, Hanabi's face flushes with thoughts of their established relationship and nostalgic memories of spending time together. She tries to get closer to him without disclosing her feelings, and the closest she can be at school is his lectern. Already her body belies her true feelings because she normally keeps up her cool demeanor in front of Narumi. Coupled with those nostalgic thoughts of him, Hanabi is disillusioned that love is worth the pain she goes through if she can never attain her deepest desire. This particular line also hints at how each character uses their body to avoid

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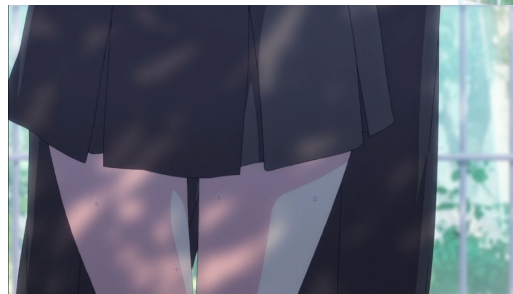
<sup>10</sup> This goes quite well with, "Love is nothing more than an exchange of illusions," a theme explored frequently throughout the anime (Lamarre 254).

“real” love, i.e actual human connection because of the thinking that love isn’t beautiful...at least the ones they have encountered throughout the series.

Hanabi’s sentiment reflects the common young working woman in modern Japanese society, as they do not find marriage as appealing and recognize that men do not want women’s love, but more their subservience (Napier 120). For a woman to survive, is easier to pretend to be engaged in a man, pretend to be demure for the attention, than to give all of themselves away and lose their autonomy. Hanabi recognizes this on some level, even though she still desperately wishes that Narumi notices her in the way that she craves.

The fragility of her emotions continues with the scenery of her kissing Mugi under summer flora behind the school building. The show presents the erotic for the first time. There are close-up shots of Hanabi’s thighs, Mugi’s arms wrapped around her waist, their kisses passionate, shown with lingering saliva sticking to their lips. They are seventeen-year-old high schoolers trying to cling to each other’s bodies, each other’s warmth.

Hanabi narrates,  
“We are each  
other’s

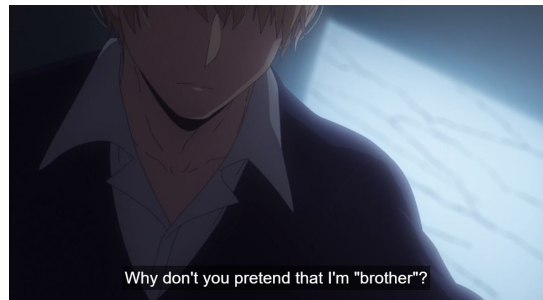


replacements for someone else,”

dictating how they are swapping their own bodies for their crushes’ (Episode 1, 3:13). They are not attached to each other in the way they want to be attached to their crushes, so their bodies are used to

make a false connection with someone else who is not there: Hanabi with Narumi, and Mugi with another teacher named Akane. Through these images, the audience is given a preview on how these desires for their crushes affect their relationship and interactions.

The episode then flashes back to when Mugi and Hanabi first make their pact to superficially date each other. They are in Mugi's room, hanging out and having fun. Yet the light atmosphere does not last long. Mugi asks Hanabi, "Are you sad?" hinting at everyone's sense of drifting loneliness (Episode 1, 13:31). This is one of the few times they openly talk about their sadness, indicating their need for emotional intimacy and this sadness is what causes them to date. Hanabi then throws her body onto Mugi while he is playing video games and they slowly realize that they have something the other craves. They end up on Mugi's bed, tenderly kissing and touching each other. There is that tension of, "Is this okay? Am I going too far? Why am I doing this?" while their eyes indicate that they are dead inside,<sup>11</sup> even though their bodies flush in passion. Once Mugi says, "Why don't you pretend I'm Nii-chan?" his eyes cannot be seen,<sup>12</sup> but Hanabi's eyes are still shown to be expressive (Episode 1, 13:52). It is as if he wants his body to pass through the moment so the male audience can embody him and let them feel the pleasure of pleasuring a girl's body.



Right then, black ink slowly spills over the white screen as a sign of loss of innocence, and after that screen transition happens, Hanabi's eyes also cannot be seen. She is now willing to give up her body to fulfill the fantasy, now letting the female audience embody the satisfaction

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<sup>11</sup> My rendering of the moment.

<sup>12</sup> Hanabi only calls Narumi "Nii-chan" throughout the anime, "nii-chan" meaning brother.



of getting pleased. As the erotic is still presented throughout this scene, the female audience can pretend that the body Mugi is touching is theirs instead of Hanabi's and have

their own physical pleasure. The next image is of Mugi's and Hanabi's clasped hands, a coming together of distorted desires as they each pretend they are someone else because it is better to feel pleasure from a crush than to



address their loneliness and hopeless love for the crush. It is seen in Hanabi's body conveying two different wants and emotions. Her moans and the way she squeezes her thighs tell the audience that she has wanted this with so long with Narumi, but her tears say that she has crossed a line and cannot go back to the simple times with Narumi or Mugi anymore, now corrupting the memories she has with Narumi. Hanabi and Mugi now begin to bring their fantasies to life through using another person's body. They start the aforementioned violent cycle to deceive themselves into thinking that using the body like this is acceptable and gets them what they need.

There is also a small moment where Hanabi worries a little if her body will be a good enough replacement as Akane, since their bodies are very different—Hanabi's has curves that are less well-defined, while Akane's is dripping with sexual desire, calling back to the rivalry



between the cute, good heroine and the sexually mature evil antagonist in manga.<sup>13</sup> But Mugi does not care, because he is fully immersed in the fantasy in loving Akane with through a female body that is a close enough substitution. There is a need to substitute bodies to fit their fantasy of being with the one they truly love, bringing their own bodies to the forefront as they squirm and writhe as they think about someone else, somewhere else. After the sexual moment, the pair decides to make a pact to be in a loose relationship until their respective crush reciprocates their desperate feelings, where Hanabi says, “You can have everything but my feelings” coupled with the image of their pinky promise, an image of innocent promise-making



(Episode 1, 20:46). The innocent image denotes their youth and naïve perception that they are in control, which later becomes incorrect in later episodes. Just in the first episode alone, the stakes are in place and *Scum's Wish* asks the question—can a relationship be sustainable given these conditions and given that these are young high schoolers who are still hopeful about their romantic future without necessarily addressing the real problems? The show argues throughout that a relationship cannot. These two characters demand much attention and compassion from the other while refusing to give them everything they have hiding up their sleeves.

The second episode picks up the pace and introduces more characters into the fray. The episode introduces the viewer to Noriko and Sanae. Noriko is a little younger than the high schoolers and is Mugi's childhood friend. Her entire personality is based on her purity as a

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<sup>13</sup> Note that Akane *looks* cute, but created this image for herself to hide her sexual persona, which will be discussed more in episode four.

prepubescent girl, even though the viewer finds out later that she is more selfish and manipulative than she seems. The first few minutes of the episode showcase Noriko's obsession with luxury and her efforts to maximize her cuteness with frilly clothes and a dainty socialite's lifestyle. This is not who Noriko truly is,<sup>14</sup> but she armors herself with cute things, which is in line with the Akita quote from earlier, where Noriko wants to be seen as highly charming and attractive so she can manipulate other people. Noriko makes it seem like she is doing this to “disrupt patriarchal structures and ‘speak’ for herself and on her own terms” (Akita 44), that this is a special part of her, but she always has to work hard for that image. Seen in the episode, she wakes up incredibly early just to make herself a nice Western breakfast and get meticulously dressed up in Western clothes for the day, but doing this harms her emotional development, since adhering to Western ideals is something she cannot keep up with forever.

It also ignores her true wants of loving Mugi and being with him. Following the Western ideal to make herself seem more attractive detracts from her pursuit of Mugi's affections, because now she is more worried than the image she presents rather than Mugi's feelings for her. She wants to seem like she is larger than life, which is what the Westernization offers, showing how dissatisfied she is with herself and uses cute Western clothes for her own deception. This masquerade hides her true feelings and she cannot perform outside of that image because it is incongruent. The fact that she can so easily don this illusion shows her not-so-innocent desires and that she is the ideal candidate for the princess image that Japanese men can fantasize about. If Hanabi had soft curves, then Noriko has even less, highlighting how much of a child she is compared to the rest of the cast and make it clear how disturbing it is for such a young girl to

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<sup>14</sup> Noriko's true self will be discussed more in episode seven.

dress up for the male gaze. It also adds to her layered deception that she can accentuate her body in these ways for power and attention.

At first glance, Noriko immediately dislikes Hanabi and her relationship with Mugi, since Noriko is hopelessly in love with Mugi and cannot stand the thought of him with someone else. Once again, anime presents the cute, innocent girl versus the more sexually mature woman, even though both of them are young girls. But Noriko is a cuter childish heroine and she knows it. She tries to highlight that so Mugi would fall for her, but it never works. Mugi still prefers Akane and still wants Hanabi as his fantastic substitute. Thinking back to Napier's claims about the sexual interest towards non-threatening girls, this makes sense. On some level, Noriko knows that these sorts of men will flock to her and do her bidding, but it can only be done by a man who is going through the identity crisis, because he is more susceptible to the image of *rorikon*. Mugi is just a high school boy who wants his women's bodies to be mature, more mature than Noriko's. Noriko does not know what to do in the face of Mugi's disinterest. The charm has never failed anyone before. So she has to turn it up even more, to the point of calling herself Moca, which stands for "most *kawaii*," and attack Hanabi's character, saying, "Poor Mugi getting tricked by a girl like this," as she clings to him (Episode 2, 5:00). Noriko saying this deflects her own tricks onto Hanabi, who is more upfront than Noriko, as Hanabi does not turn to cute clothing to attain Mugi's attention. Noriko says it to seem more innocent and earnest about her feelings, which is not the case at all, which will be explored more in episode seven.

Right off the bat, Hanabi deems Noriko annoying, but Noriko cannot act any other way because of the version of herself that she decided to portray. She has to cling to Mugi, half in desperation that he wants to touch her just as much as she does, half in asserting her cute

caricature. The anime implies that Noriko emphasizes her cuteness for Mugi's attention, but also casts doubt when the viewer sees her riding the train alone and Noriko thinks, "I just end up recreating him in my own mind to fit my needs. It scares me" (Episode 2, 7:28). She knows that she is achingly lonely and loves Mugi, but she is also aware that she likes the image that he can morph into rather than who he actually is, which is the point of the fantasy. It is just something that people can play with and change to suit their distorted desires. This is kind of what Japanese society does in real life: put lofty ideals onto women. Society says that a woman has to dress this way, act that way, only serve their wants. Real women cannot do everything that is prescribed of them, but an anime character can, which is what makes this medium so dangerous. It gives the male audience the thought that that is how Japanese women are supposed to behave towards them. Yet Noriko is not alone in morphing people's bodies in fantasies. Hanabi and Mugi do it to each other to fill the void their crush has left behind. Sanae does it to cause pain, which will be explored in later episodes. Narumi does it out of nostalgia for his deceased mother. Women and men do it to each other in Japanese society today. No one is safe from this behavior.

The episode then switches over to Mugi and Hanabi singing karaoke that then slowly devolves into a deep conversation about why they both pursue their crushes, knowing what their answer would be anyway. Mugi says, "Once you fall for someone, it has to be them" (Episode 2, 12:13). That line is so heartbreaking, because it reinforces the hopelessness of love first mentioned in the first episode. But Mugi's and Hanabi's actions are much more telling. In this moment, they are physically close, belying their emotional closeness as they dump their burdens on each other. It is so strange that they still find the capacity for intimacy in such heartbreaking moments as they fall into despair of having an unattainable crush. For the first time, their

relationship cannot be called purely superficial. They treat each other's sadness seriously and remind the other that they need to keep trying, but also that they are not alone in these feelings. Even though they are close, physically and emotionally, it brings up the question, why? Why do these two continue the fake relationship? Their mutual despair drives them closer together and at some point, when and how can either of them tell what is purely physical and what is platonic and loving in other ways? At least right now, though, they both crave this simple intimacy in singing karaoke together and disclosing the reasons they still chase Narumi and Akane in a way that the body cannot convey in a sexual context.

Yet quickly, the moment gets ruined and they end up kissing with a newfound fervor, saliva dripping from their mouths. Mugi is on top, his hands holding Hanabi's wrists, keeping her on the receiving end of the pleasure. Hanabi is surprised and asks,



“Mugi?” After a beat, Mugi replies, “Don’t you mean Nii-chan?” to which Hanabi’s eyes widen (Episode 2, 13:35). For that moment, Hanabi was okay with kissing Mugi and not Narumi, but Mugi cannot directly face his sadness and uses Hanabi’s body to avoid it, seen when he initiates the kissing. It is so much easier to avoid talking about his feelings for Akane any more deeply and possibly any mentions of his past when he can just enjoy Hanabi’s moans coming together with his own in the present,<sup>15</sup> because he always uses Hanabi’s body to escape his reality. Eventually, Hanabi loses herself in the fantasy as well, and they go back into the comfortable

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<sup>15</sup> There is a flashback at this moment to a girl whom Mugi used to have sexual relations with.

motions of kissing and loving someone else who is not here. This foreshadows that constant use of sexual pleasure to avoid their bigger problems will soon drive a wedge into their relationship, and the consequences of this deception inevitably blow up in their faces down the line.

The sexual tension repeats the next day, when Hanabi and Mugi talk about her hanging out with some classmates after school instead of walking back home with him. Suddenly, Mugi gets very close to her, reminiscent of their past sexual encounters, and Hanabi's face flushes in expectation. But Mugi diffuses it by mussing up her hair endearingly. Hanabi blushes, a little embarrassed that she expected another sexual interaction in the middle of the school day, but it goes to show how much they are used to their sexual contact even while throwing their emotional burdens onto each other. Can Hanabi ever consider him just a friend as well? He has the capacity to be multiple things to her—friend, confidant, lover—but if Hanabi only focuses on one aspect of him, is that not her imposing her distorted desires, just like Noriko? When will their deception end and allow them to just be friends? Mugi is once again morphed into an object that serves Hanabi's needs, almost as if he is not a real person. This can be seen as a subversion of how women are treated, giving Hanabi a bit more power in the relationship. Therefore, Hanabi can further deceive herself and impose her wants onto Mugi.

Sanae's entrance into the anime finds her first seen talking to Hanabi at school, and indicates that they are close friends, seen in the way Sanae brushes her shoulder with Hanabi's. The end of the episode shows that Sanae has romantic feelings for Hanabi and will do any small thing to feel Hanabi's body while still keeping up pretenses. Sanae early on has the clearest juxtaposition of her feelings and body language, because when Hanabi asks Sanae to come sleep over, Sanae repeatedly thinks to herself, "Keep it cool. You're just friends. It doesn't mean

anything. Don't do anything stupid.”<sup>16</sup> Everything was set up for a casual sleepover. Yet at the last few seconds of the episode, Sanae is seen on top of Hanabi in her bed, in their pajamas. Sanae questions, “What did I just do?” (Episode 2, 21:10). Her body betrayed her inner feelings that she tried so hard to keep veiled and kissed Hanabi. Sanae's deception backfired and she has to deal with the effects. Now she has to grapple with the confusion in Hanabi's eyes, leaving everything up in the air until the next episode. This initial taking of Hanabi's body eventually becomes controlling, which will be discussed in later episodes.

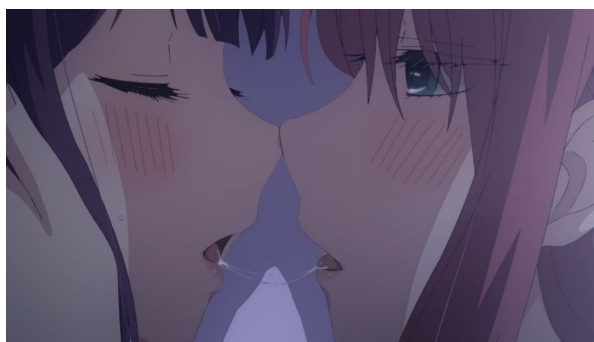
The third episode opens with a flashback of an unknown man sexually harassing Sanae until Hanabi steps in and passively drives him away by taking a picture of his face. It is passive because Hanabi does not verbally call out the man and bring attention to themselves. Sexual harassment on public transit is a very real problem in Japan, especially during rush hours. It is so bad that some train cars are women-only to decrease the number of incidents, but it still continues to be a problem. *Scum's Wish's* imitation of a real-life dilemma indicates that it affected Sanae's development and perception of her own body and affected how she sees Hanabi. Because Hanabi only steps near Sanae and takes a picture of the man, which scares him and he moves on, Sanae sees her as her rescuer and worships Hanabi. In this scene, the man has no face or recognizable features, signifying that anyone could have done this, and the fact that Hanabi does not publicly say anything exhibits how girls and women are afraid to bring attention upon themselves, lest they be seen as selfish and disrupting the harmony Japanese society has worked so hard to create and maintain. Any man can act upon his desires in the sea of anonymity, but once he is exposed, his desires fade away and he must act properly again,

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<sup>16</sup> My rendering of her thoughts.

repressing his inner self once more. When the unknown man leaves Sanae alone, Hanabi stays at her side, holding her hand in comfort until they reach their stop. Once they leave the train, Hanabi tells her, “Don’t hold back. It was scary, wasn’t it?” giving Sanae’s body the space to break down, making this a tender moment (Episode 3, 1:01). Hanabi’s kind words display that she understands Sanae’s pain and turbulent emotions. Sanae, in knowing that another girl understands the trauma she just went through, is relieved to be able to have a private moment to cry before the public face is donned again. This scene indicates that everyone has a public and private face, which keeps the cycle of deception going.

The episode goes back to the present, where Sanae and Hanabi are having normal sleepover fun, and the two friends make two of their stuffed animals snuggle with each other. It is meant to be seen as silly and innocent, but it can also be seen as a projection of Sanae’s desires, since she wishes that she could snuggle with Hanabi in a concupiscent way. Soon, they are lying side by side in bed, and Sanae’s face burns red at such physical intimacy that she does not know how to hide. There is a close-up of Hanabi’s lips, bringing back the erotic into a seemingly innocent moment, which is what pushes Sanae over the edge. Sanae murmurs, “I can’t hold



back anymore,” and kisses Hanabi (Episode 3, 4:39). Hanabi is floored, unable to understand where this action came from. Sanae’s body gave her feelings away and cannot hide behind the



thin veil of friendship anymore. Hanabi whispers, “Ecchan?” tears welling up (Episode 3, 5:03).

<sup>17</sup> Sanae then says that she knows that Hanabi does not truly love Mugi, and Hanabi asks how, and Sanae replies with, “I know because I’ve been watching you” (Episode 3, 5:41). This is in line with Hanabi’s observation of Narumi, who said in the first episode that she has been watching Narumi for a long time and therefore saw first that he is in love with Akane before he realized himself. It goes to show that people’s bodies cannot really be kept to themselves in this anime, because there is always someone watching or always someone imposing their will. Your thoughts are never quite as private as you think, because your body reveals all of your tells and insecurities, so others can watch and comment, speculate and fantasize.

The scene fades into a flashback of a boy confessing to Hanabi and her rejecting him with, “There’s nothing more revolting than the affection of someone you’re completely disinterested in, is there?” (Episode 3, 7:03). It sounds very telling that the audience hears this after her romantic encounter with Sanae, because Hanabi is not inherently attracted to Sanae at all, but she cannot say that Sanae’s affections are revolting, because she does love Sanae in her own way, just not how Sanae wants. Now that Hanabi knows that there is someone close to her to loves her, Hanabi muses, “I had no idea that being the object of someone’s desires is so heavy” (Episode 3, 7:22). This is said while there is a close-up to her heavily outlined vagina. This cannot be a coincidence. It can be understood that Hanabi’s womanhood, her sex, the thing



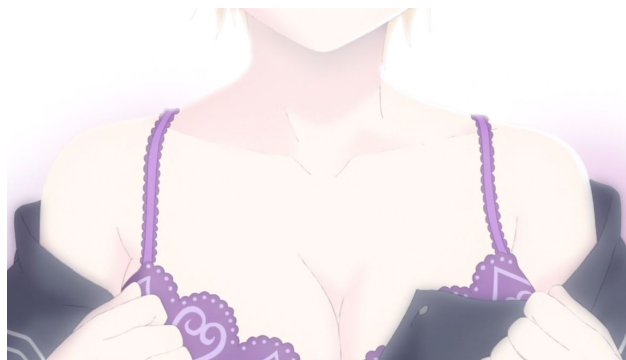
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<sup>17</sup> Hanabi only calls Sanae “Ecchan” throughout the anime, denoting their close friendship.

that attracts Sanae, that is not Hanabi's anymore, because Sanae took Hanabi's body that night. A similar idea was suggested in a pornographic anime called *La Blue Girl* that says, "If you control the womb, you control the woman." That is the connotation associated with the image of Hanabi's vagina, because Sanae did control her the night before. If a "wom[a]n's sexuality can therefore betray a female," then Sanae's sexuality betrayed her feelings, and Hanabi's sexuality betrayed her loneliness (Napier 71). Knowing that someone wants you sexually, romantically, emotionally is so hard to bear sometimes, and Hanabi's body has to carry that burden. What do you do with your body then? How can you partake in manipulating others if someone's desires holds your body hostage?

While Hanabi ruminates the consequences of what she has done with her friend the previous night—what is their relationship now?—the perspective switches to Mugi and his memories of his middle school days. The scene turns to his friends discussing the female upperclassmen's maturing bodies. Just hearing a bunch of seventh graders talking about and salivating over a girl's body is unsettling for the audience, reflecting Japanese men's sentiments

in real life. In this scene, Mugi is introduced to an upperclassman named Mei. One of the first shots of her is of her breasts, already sexualizing her role in the narrative. Their relationship quickly becomes sexual,



where she imposes her desires on Mugi and he has to comply. Mugi narrates, "She was always lonely. It wasn't normal" (Episode 3, 10:20). It does not feel normal that a seemingly popular upperclassman is

lonely. It does not feel normal that the upperclassman can only release her loneliness through sexual acts. Mei, a fourteen, fifteen-year-old girl, is preying on a twelve-year-old boy for her sexual needs. She only needed another's body, and it does not matter who, as long as he can perform adequately and not complain.

She becomes Mugi's first sexual partner and teaches him everything that she knows and wants, essentially transforming him into a sex toy. The audience only knows Mei in this particular context, so with the understanding that she made Mugi grow up faster than he was meant to makes her a sculptor of desires.<sup>18</sup> Mugi's innocence is lost, and too soon. A variety of layers are seen here—a middle-schooler's body is sexualized, she uses her sexualized body to impose her desires by initiating sexual encounters, and Mugi is bereft of genuine emotions, because that is not what Mei wanted. When Mugi and Mei first have sex, Mugi comments, "Her body didn't feel real," further calling upon the male fantasy (Episode 3, 10:28). Mugi did not have to attach any particular emotions, because it was as if a real, breathing girl was not there. And is that not the dream for many male protagonists in anime today? To just have sexual relations with a gorgeous girl who will not do anything that he does not want her to do? The prevalence of these anime can allow for the Japanese male audience to embody those dreams as well, seen in pornography and sexualized memorabilia.

These memories present Mei's hypersexuality as not as evil as the anime shows with Akane, but more gray. She is just a young girl who can better use her body to manipulate others than Noriko. Mei even tells Mugi, "Sorry for robbing you of your adolescence" (Episode 3, 13:03). Through her apology, Mei is aware that she made him grow up too fast, demanding that

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<sup>18</sup> Let me clarify that their relationship was consensual.

he spends all of his energy on her to satisfy her the entirety of their relationship. Mei's initial perceived innocence deceives surrounding characters and pulls Mugi into her trap of needing sexual release, using Mugi's body for her own gain.

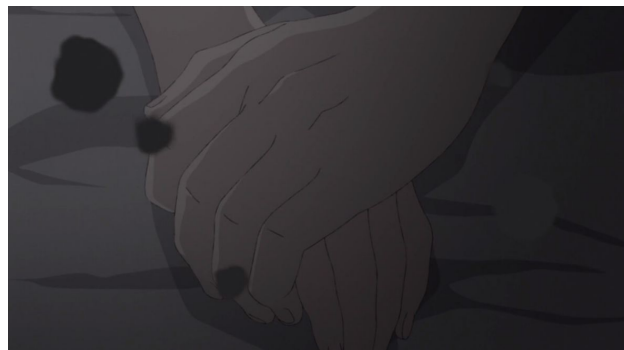
Mugi then wakes up in a sweat with an erection. Hanabi stops by his apartment unannounced, feeling lonely and needing some physical comfort after her romantic encounter with Sanae, and slips into his bed with him. Mugi's face turns red at Hanabi's presence and covers his lower body with his bed sheets, not wanting her to see the erection. But once Hanabi notices, Mugi eggs her on to touch it, but swiftly changes his mind. Now he needs sexual release, but does not quite want Hanabi to touch his penis. He knows that once they cross that boundary, his body is put on display again for a girl's desires and he does not want to rob Hanabi of her adolescence like how his adolescence was robbed. When Mugi changes his mind, he stops Hanabi's hand, saying, "I won't be able to stop. I know I won't" (Episode 3, 13:26). But she says that she does not want him to stop, to let him feel pleasure too, but she only says it because she is lonely and recognizes that he is too. With that statement, Mugi realizes that he is "just a toy for adolescents" (Episode 3, 13:43), something a pretty girl can play with, and has to deal with the loss of control over his body once again. Just how Hanabi's body is not free, neither is his, because there is always someone who wants to manipulate and paint his body with distorted desires.



Hanabi decides to give him a handjob and she thinks, "Oh that feels good for him, that's so...cute" (Episode 3, 14:39). The audience sees that cute is not verbalized, but rather is on

the screen with a pink background...but the black ink pours over it, erasing the innocence. A while later, Hanabi opens up to Mugi, saying, “I want to try to love you” (Episode 3, 15:59).<sup>19</sup> Hanabi’s words signify that she wants to have a more genuine connection with Mugi and break their contract. There is only so much the body can do with casual flings, and this time she lets go of her inhibitions to find deeper emotional connections. Note that Mugi does not actually respond, but only smiles and nervously laughs. Is his silence a yes in letting things become serious? Or is his silence a sign of uncertainty in his own feelings?

The next day at school, Hanabi and Mugi talk about Akane and Hanabi realizes that Mugi will always try to explain Akane’s suspicious actions and still blindly love her. This realization brings Hanabi and the audience back to the handjob scene, where she heard Mugi murmur Akane’s name instead of hers, causing her eyes to widen in surprise and disappointment. Deep down, Hanabi did want to hear her name in hopes that maybe their relationship could be more genuine, but belatedly remembered that Mugi is still operating under their contract. The black ink proceeds to bleed over their clasped hands and ruins the innocence they had



together. The scene cuts back to the present. Shown through her narration, Hanabi now sees that Mugi’s earlier silence was a rejection and feels a sense of pain and betrayal, because her body

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<sup>19</sup> Before Hanabi says this, she ruminates on her kiss with Sanae again and recalls how easy it was to touch Mugi like that, but not Sanae, and she is having a crisis trying to understand why. Is it due to the fact that Sanae is a girl? Hanabi narrates, “I was too scared to touch Ecchan” (Episode 3, 14:58), showing that the answer must be yes, because even though Hanabi is not romantically attracted to Mugi, she still recognizes him as a sexual being, yet cannot recognize Sanae as one due to their close friendship.

wants more than just sexual pleasure and wants to take this relationship more seriously. The rejection causes Hanabi to emotionally and physically pull away from Mugi as she tries to find her own replacement later on. She understands that he loves Akane most, but she wishes that he can see Hanabi as more. For the first time, Hanabi wants to stop the deception, but Mugi does not want to, so the cycle will continue.

In the moment, though, she feels intense jealousy and wants to confront Akane for holding this boy's feelings hostage as she says, "Now I feel something else. Something seething" (Episode 3, 19:45). Hanabi finally solidifies her dislike for Akane as she says these words, making her act upon her feelings. Hanabi's confusion is then morphed into anger towards Akane, because at their confrontation at the end of the episode, she slowly comes to the knowledge that Akane is using men's feelings for power, setting up the main conflict in the next episode. Hanabi also begins to realize that she is not pulling the strings at all in this game of deception, but rather the evil, mature woman, once again following the clichéd competitive formula in manga.

### ***Scum's Wish: Analyzing Power Dynamics***

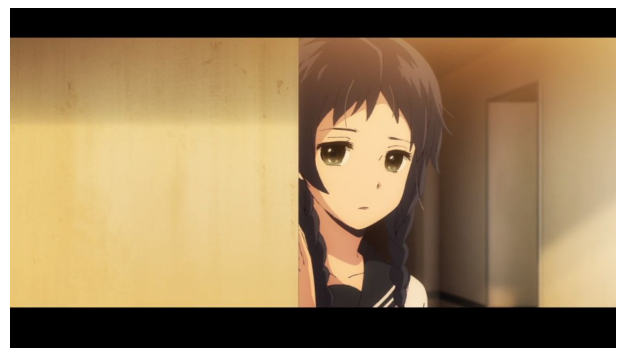
Episode four is the turning point within the anime where it debuts Akane's true character and her motivations for her actions. Until that point, she is only seen as a side character with whom Narumi is in love with, but her cute and kind demeanor is an act for her distorted self. She says herself that she loves sex and she loves being wanted, but not actual attachments, seen when she narrates, "There's no point unless you're wanted" (Episode 4, 00:29). And because of her body, men will flock to her with no effort on her part, letting her take advantage without a second thought, breaking everyone's hearts. The episode flashes back to her middle school days,

where she first realizes how low her sense of loyalty is. She flirts with her friend's crush, aware



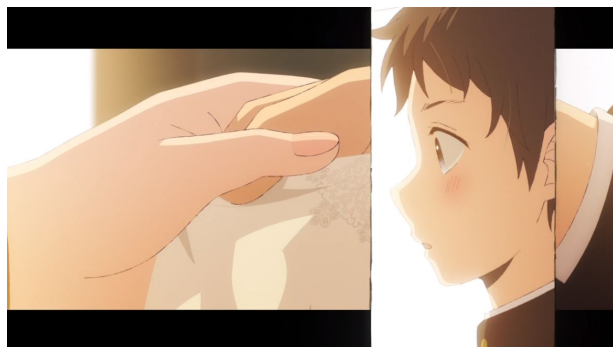
that her friend is watching from around a corner. She is also aware of her friend's feelings for this boy and thinks that they would be a good couple, but Akane continues to lead the boy on, thinking, "Something

about how neatly that would fit...really bothered me" (Episode 4, 1:02). Akane could not handle letting things fall as they are. She had to intervene, had to flirt with the boy until it ended in him asking her out. Akane deceives both



secondary characters in this moment, highlighting her manipulative tendencies.

Later, when Akane and her friend meet, the friend tells her, "I was just really surprised. You two look so good together" (Episode 4, 1:45). Little does the friend know that Akane only flirted with the boy because she knew the friend was watching. Akane is not interested in the boy at all for any of his qualities, but rather his perceived unavailability. She narrates, "I couldn't



help myself. I just wanted to try" (Episode 4, 1:27). To Akane, the boy unknowingly exudes the image that he is wanted and worth the attention, therefore Akane has to try him for herself, seen in the way she intentionally drops

her handkerchief and touches his hand when he picks it up for her. Following the line of thinking

that Akane has to try a new product, she can be considered the perfect consumer. She wants things that other people want, because if the general public wants it, then it must be worth looking at and consuming. Thus, Akane eagerly jumps on the bandwagon and consumes the product without a second thought. Due to her beauty, she is allowed to have access to the product first, letting her exercise her devious desires and manipulate everyone.

To her, boys are that unattainable product and she loves exercising her consumer rights and advantages as a woman. She sees boys and the girls who chase them as exploited goods and services,<sup>20</sup> and Akane detests that people are so



readily used, making her say, “I would rather die than find myself exploited like her” (Episode 4, 2:09). She refuses to let herself be used so easily just by misinformation and fickle feelings, so she cuts herself off from emotions and focuses on the physical pleasure of taking candies from babies. The taking of candies from babies is nearly literal in *Scum's Wish*, since she holds power over Narumi and Mugi and dangles them in front of Hanabi, a child. Akane's deception gives her power and showing it off gives her the satisfaction that she is the most desirable.

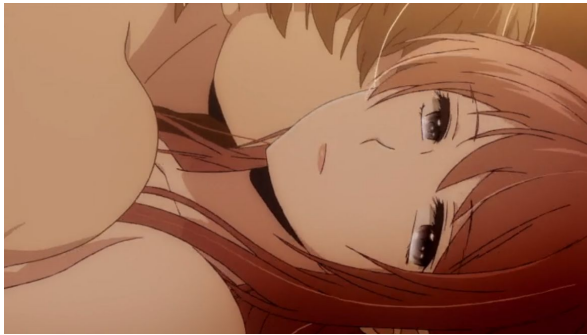
The flashback ends, and the viewer is met with Akane and one of her boy toys, Terauchi, waking up after a round of sexual intercourse. Terauchi mentions that he does not have anyone on the side, and Akane's eyes dim in disinterest and disappointment. It is not fun for her to be with a single man, since there would be no scandal, and that is what she lives for. After a few

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<sup>20</sup> Akane is lucky that she does not have to chase men, because they come to her freely.



moments, Terauchi is ready to go for round two, but Akane has no particular interest in having sex at that moment, but Terauchi gently teases her, saying, “Come on, if you’re awake already...” (Episode 4, 3:03). His words indicate that he is more interested in enjoying himself



than pleasuring Akane. Akane makes no resistance and gives up her body to him. Her eyes stay dim and uninterested as Terauchi gets all the physical pleasure, which is a disturbing image.

Yes, Akane loves her body and sexual freedom, but how can her body truly be hers if she does not care who touches it and when? She invites the male audience to ravish her body and she would not do a thing about it, because her bodily pleasure does not matter as much as a man’s, seen in the way that the audience do not see her reach an orgasm, but see Terauchi eagerly fondling her breasts.

To Akane, sex is only of instrumental value to her and has no attachment to it because she feels complete control in taking away other people’s goods that she herself deems worthy of. She does not care about physical pleasure, thus it lets her be the fantasy for the man she is with. Akane existing as a fantasy grants her superiority over other women, because she can say that she has better sexual appeal. Yet the lack of enthusiastic consent is concerning, and if a fictional character is allowed to take a woman’s body, then what is stopping a man in the real world to do the same? Nothing, because the man can get everything he wants if he so chooses, according to Japanese society.

At the same time, the episode cuts to Narumi and his thoughts of his deceased mother. He says that he does not remember much about her other than her long, flowing hair...just like

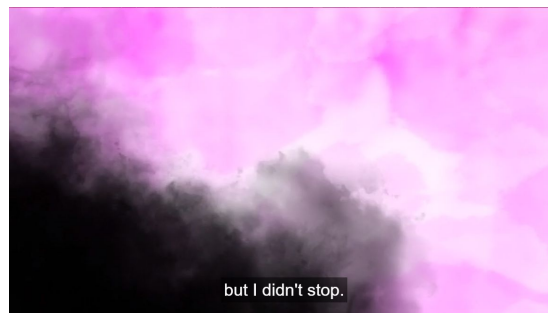
Akane's. So when Akane and Narumi first meet under the cherry blossoms, Narumi is taken aback at this magnificent sight before him and his face turns red. He thinks, "Love at first sight on a spring day" and falls in love (Episode 4, 9:35). Narumi only likes Akane because her hair reminds him of his mother, which is quite strange, because he does not



bother getting to know her personality, indicating that he is attached to the nostalgia Akane brings and will blindly love her. It is reminiscent of Japanese men wanting a mother figure to take care of them, forever wanting the perfect housewife who will do nothing but nurture and love (Goozner, Chicago Tribune.com). Through his words, Narumi buys into the perceived image of Akane, expressing that an illusion is better than reality.

Hanabi has just witnessed Narumi confessing his feelings to Akane, where she realizes it was a ploy on Akane's part to break Hanabi's heart. She runs to Sanae, not wanting to tell Mugi the kind of person his crush is. For the first time, the two girls have sexual relations. In the midst of it, Hanabi narrates, "I at least knew that it wasn't really okay, but I didn't stop" (Episode 4,

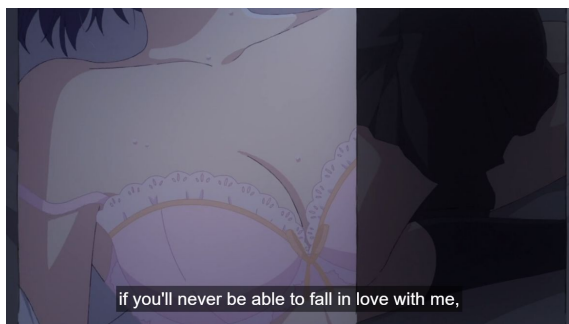
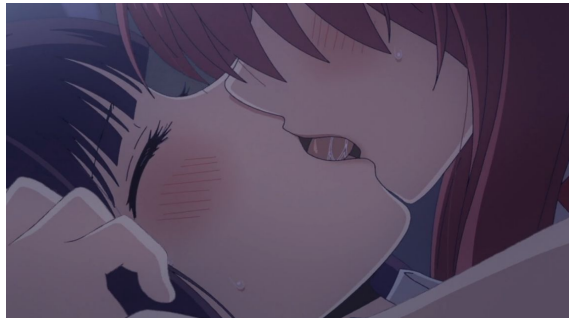
14:18).<sup>21</sup> While Hanabi for physical comfort is friendship, displaying sense of right and wrong acceptable to hurt



sees that going to Sanae damaging to their that Hanabi still has her intact, it still is not someone's feelings by

<sup>21</sup> Later in 14:48, Hanabi says, "Ecchan, I can't see your face like this," as they are kissing under the streetlight. This inability to see and be shrouded in darkness continues into the consequent erotic scene.

taking advantage of their feelings. Hanabi knows this, but does not stop because she is so, so lonely. Taking advantage of someone's feelings for you is selfish and destroys the trust that was once there. Hanabi is spiraling, yes, since she lost Narumi and she feels like she is losing Mugi and cannot bring herself to hurt him so she can feel better. And Sanae has always been there, making it so...easy to just fall in, to kiss her. Hanabi chooses to lose her body in Sanae so she does not have to confront the pain of losing two men to Akane. Hanabi participates in the cycle of deception and lies due to this pain.



She lets the erotic take over, because like Mugi, it is easier to enjoy the pleasure than to think about how her life is falling apart. But this time, Hanabi wants to see Sanae, see the look in her eyes as they both reach an orgasm. Hanabi wants to break the male gaze and make it a tender, same-sex moment, but Sanae moves her face so her eyes cannot be seen, giving Hanabi the opportunity to project her feelings for Narumi onto Sanae like she did to Mugi.<sup>22</sup> Sanae tries to have her body pass through

the scene so the male gaze can inhabit the pleasure of touching Hanabi. Sanae does not care as long as she gets the physical affection she has craved for so long. Maybe Hanabi will not be crying out Sanae's name, but at least she can pretend, so she can live in the fantasy that Hanabi loves her and stay in her deluded thoughts that Hanabi's body belongs to her.

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<sup>22</sup> Note that whenever Hanabi kisses someone, her partner's eyes are shrouded, but her eyes are still seen, another indicator that her partner is meant to not matter so the male audience can inhabit them.

Then, Sanae tries to push her friend to her limit to figure out how far she can go. Sanae has Hanabi's body all to herself in this moment and Sanae wants to relish in all of her, punish her body a little, daring Hanabi to go against her wishes, seen in the way she aggressively kisses Hanabi. She even says, "I know you won't say no because you don't want to lose me. So of course I'll take advantage. For the cruel things you've done to me, if you'll never be able to fall in love with me, then I will take whatever I can get, even just your warmth" (Episode 4, 16:21).<sup>23</sup> Sanae sounds exactly like the entitled Japanese men in society, expecting women to give up their bodies because men deserve it, reminiscent of World War II expectations of men needing sexual release to perform well and the introduction of "comfort women" (Kincaid, Japan Powered.com).<sup>24</sup> That is ruinous behavior, exploiting your friend's body to satisfy your own distorted desires, because it does not solve your inner turmoil at all. Maybe this is what Akane was referring to. Some people will want to own others' bodies and make them do things that is not who they are, and Akane refuses to participate in that sort of trend. The scene is problematic for this reason. Also, when Hanabi tries to replace Sanae with Narumi in her head, it does not work and it cannot work because there are too many details signaling that this is a girl, breaking her immersion. Even if Sanae does not care if Hanabi thinks about someone else, she inherently makes Hanabi

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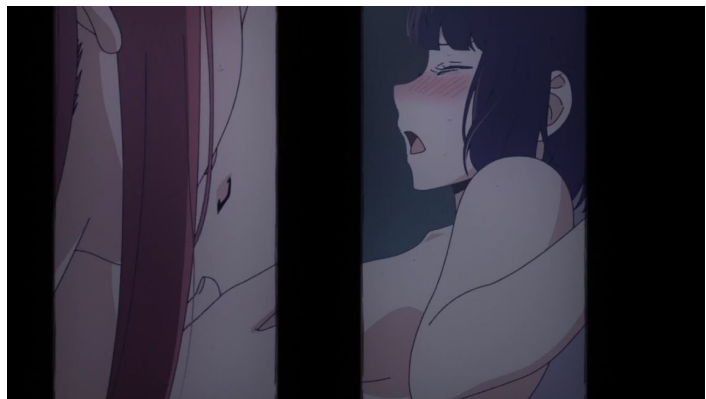
<sup>23</sup> Realize that there is no verbal consent or even discussion of Sanae's feelings outside of the body, so both of them are writhing in bed. Actually, it is better to say that only Hanabi is writhing in bed. She receives all of the pleasure, and Sanae's body is passed through the narrative so Hanabi's fondled body can be the sole focus. Taken out of context, it feels like another porn, begging the question, is that the point? Japanese men love watching a young, pretty girl in the throes of passion, especially so when there are multiple girls. It also works out that one of them takes on the male role that men can inhabit. But the lack of consent is deeply disturbing—Sanae realizes that Hanabi might be uncomfortable, but she is too full of her desires that she needs to take Hanabi's body for herself, which is highly disrespectful. It is unfortunate for Hanabi, as she did reciprocate, but mostly because of her own loneliness and so took Sanae's body as well as give up her own, leading Sanae to take it too far.

<sup>24</sup> It does not have to be just men, but anyone of any gender can have these feelings of entitlement.

actually see Sanae and her female body, possibly giving Sanae some perverse satisfaction that Hanabi cannot imagine her beloved Narumi.

While Sanae takes her body, Hanabi narrates, “It’s not that I didn’t know that there’s a limit to the passion someone gives you,” telling the audience that she is mistaking Sanae’s pain as passion (Episode 4, 18:20). Sanae is just using her body to her whim, not because she wants Hanabi to feel good. In the end, Hanabi’s body feels good, but her emotions are still tangled up.

The audience also notices that Hanabi is the only one who has her clothes off for most of the erotic scene, where Sanae takes on the male role and keeps the focus on Hanabi’s body for male consumption.<sup>25</sup> When Hanabi says, “And



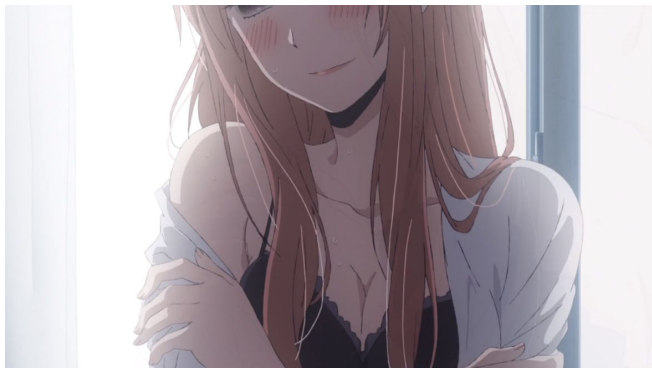
I filled my void with Ecchan,” it is not all that true (Episode 4, 18:53). Hanabi’s void of hopelessness, rejection, and craving for emotional and physical intimacy is momentarily filled with Sanae, but Sanae does not orgasm with her, so the pleasure was not mutual. But Hanabi lets her do what she wants, because no one else can give pleasure to her now. Hanabi equates sexual pleasure with emotional and avoids the actual problem by superficially filling a hole in the wrong place. Both of them are mistaken in involving their bodies for this scene, because Sanae took advantage of Hanabi’s loyalty to her, and Hanabi took advantage of Sanae’s willingness to give her physical pleasure instead of talking about the real issue. Therefore, at the end of the

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<sup>25</sup> Sanae touching Hanabi’s genitals as a power move at 17:50 is callback to the *La Blue Girl* cited in the episode above, making the scene more problematic, as it hints that Sanae feels ownership over Hanabi’s body.

episode, Hanabi feels inferior to Akane as a—manipulative—woman and thus pits her body and self-confidence against Akane’s to feel worthy, which continues to delay the problem and consequent resolution. The point is not to play Akane’s game by her rules; it is to realize that Akane’s methods are not healthy and to make the choice to rectify that. Yet Hanabi does not care; she is falling apart and needs to grasp onto something, anything, to lord over Akane. Hanabi fiercely needs to win this game of deceit in order to feel in control.

The episode ends with Hanabi confronting Akane to ask why she manipulated her to witness Narumi’s confession, to which Akane answers, “Being desired by men, there’s no greater feeling than that,” as she half-strips and shows off her cleavage to anger Hanabi (Episode



4, 21:11). She deliberately uses her body to supplement her words to show that Hanabi will always be inferior in so many ways. The biggest question as the episode cuts to the ending theme is, why? Why must society pit two women against each other, especially a

seventeen-year-old girl and a grown woman? Akane has the ideal hourglass body, and Hanabi cannot have that body yet, but desperately wants it. Japanese society has created the expectation for all women to look like Akane, and Akane teases Hanabi with that unattainable image for absolutely no reason other than as an ego booster, since she calls Hanabi an accessible classmate and points out that she is the more desirable woman as part of Akane’s web of duplicity.

Episode five continues Hanabi’s downward spiral. One of the first poignant moments is Hanabi and Sanae waking up after their sexual encounter the previous night. Hanabi stares at

Sanae's back, and right as Sanae turns around to face her, her face switches to Akane's, halting Hanabi's thoughts and actions. That brief hallucination projected onto someone's body indicates Hanabi's fear coming to life. Hanabi does not want to be like Akane and sleep around with people, using their feelings, but does it regardless because she has no other way to cope. She wants the physical pleasure that Akane receives so effortlessly, but Akane's type of pleasure can only be fulfilled by sleeping around and keeping her emotions in check, which is not who Hanabi is. She is always expressive and cannot fathom how Akane does it, yet tries to emulate her regardless. Hanabi is tired of following in Akane's steps and wants to be genuine, but cannot anymore, as she has gone too far.

The scene immediately cuts to Mugi and his statement that he knows about Akane's true self, and has known for a long time, contradictory to what Hanabi thought.<sup>26</sup> He found out when Mei told him that Akane was sleeping around with older men and, not believing, followed Akane and found her walking with an older man into a love motel.<sup>27</sup>



After this revelation, at their next tutoring session, Mugi is overanalyzing her actions. The way she angles her face, the way she looks at him under her long eyelashes, that voice...it is all part of Akane's construction of the world and how she wants to be perceived. She puts on an air of innocence, but everything is calculated. Oddly enough, she shows who she is but suppresses who

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<sup>26</sup> Back in episode four, Hanabi briefly considers telling Mugi the truth about Akane, thinking, "I'm sure Mugi would be hurt if he found out," but decides against it, noting that she just wants to hurt him for her own selfish reasons (Episode 4, 12:39).

<sup>27</sup> A depiction of *enjo kōsai*, although it is not known if she was compensated.

she is. Akane has to be cute and innocent in order to carry out her distorted desires, but can never show her true desires to those she wants to manipulate most. Mugi acknowledges that she does all of these things for a man's attention because she cannot live without a man. Seen through the flashback, Akane and Mugi are both highly aware of her limited movement in the working world and in the feminine sphere, so she uses what she has to her advantage to get the pleasure she cannot get on her own, highlighting part of her reason to manipulate others.

Therefore, when Mugi says, "Akane then suddenly became this fragile, sympathetic girl to me," he places his opinion on her because he sees her façade, but he sympathizes instead of demonizes (Episode 5, 5:42).<sup>28</sup> Maybe that is how we should treat these types of characters. A woman's body is "first an object of control and violence by the male and uncontrollable by the female, and the second as an active vessel of triumphant resistance" (Napier 72). Every girl in the anime, except for Noriko, the caricature of the cutest heroine, is stuck in this cycle of, "I need to break out of my role as this object of control and then resist," but then the physical pleasure of being an object is what gets them in the end, repeating the cycle.<sup>29</sup> Because of this, Mugi can understand where Akane is coming from, but the fact that she does so in a cunning way cannot be ignored. Mugi tries to rationalize his feelings for her, even knowing how destructive she can be, because in the face of the truth, he still cannot let go, evoking his earlier statement of loving someone no matter what, despite getting fooled, in episode two.

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<sup>28</sup> There is also the question of whether Akane is aware that Mugi knows. How far can these two guess the other's actions?

<sup>29</sup> My rendering of those thoughts; there is speculation that Sanae is the only one who actively notices this violent cycle and therefore takes on the male role to seduce Hanabi and keep her in it, because the second she falls in love with Hanabi, she is not treated as an object by other men, but treats Hanabi as an object, due to her distorted desires.



In Mugi's despair, he decides to call Mei for sexual release and for a distraction from his loneliness. It is telling that he does not call Hanabi, illustrating that their relationship is beginning to strain. Mei immediately gives up all pretense of just catching up, knowing that was never what their relationship was, and leads him into a love motel to have sex. Mugi cannot get into it, lost in his thoughts of Akane and Hanabi. Mugi gives up his body for mindless pleasure, but it shows that he is getting tired of physical attachments and wants something more substantial, like Hanabi.<sup>30</sup> Mei sees Mugi's distant eyes and bites his ear possessively. It is one of the few times, if not the only time, that she shows actual attachment to Mugi. She is normally mellow, but seeing her get riled up enough over someone who is not even hers to bite him like that gives her away. For just one moment, her body says more than what she could have said. She becomes a real person who wants more than Mugi's body; she wants his attention, which breaks the fantasy image Mugi usually has for her. After sexual intercourse, Mei comments, "You know, we've never done it when you wanted to before...that makes us even" (Episode 5, 8:47). Mei is trying to say that Mugi now used Mei as a tool for sexual pleasure, instead of the other way around, but does it make them even? Out of the several times they have done it in middle school compared to the one time he initiated, is it really that fair to say? Nevertheless, it does say a lot that Mugi did it out of his own volition, even though this may be his form of escaping. For him, it is better to mess around with someone who does not care; that way no one gets hurt. The cycle is meant to exist so that there is no betrayal or pain, and in this moment, Mugi and Mei are repressing their feelings to a T.

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<sup>30</sup> Reminiscent of "You can have everything but my feelings" in episode one.

Later, Mugi and Hanabi meet up again at school, where their conversation is filled with awkward silences. Hanabi narrates, “We stopped talking about things that might get too real” (Episode 5, 9:59). Now both of them are afraid of emotional attachments, and it shows in their physicality. They are farther apart, averting eye contact. This is very different than how they used to be a few episodes prior, where they were joking around and falling into each other’s comfort. Now, too many things are keeping them apart. What do you say to someone who wants to try falling in love with you? What do you say to someone who you do not want to hurt? Neither of them can answer these questions, letting their silence fester in the gaps in their relationship. Hanabi thinks, “If it’s just about filling in the loneliness, then I don’t need Mugi anymore,” which is incredibly damaging, because in saying so, she continues to not address her issues and pushes Mugi away later on (Episode 5, 10:26). She also has this thought right before she kisses him, bewildering the audience. What is her body trying to convey after that thought? It could be seen a sort of goodbye kiss, where Hanabi pushes all of her desperations into this kiss as one last attempt to tell Mugi how she really feels before going back to the strange distance. During the kiss, Mugi reaches for her hand and not her body, telling the audience that he wants this to be more intimate than a casual thing.<sup>31</sup> And right after, they both admit that they have slept with someone else, feeling liberated from sexual and social pretenses.<sup>32</sup> This vulnerable moment where they reveal a truth about themselves is the last time they are truly honest and almost commit to each other for real, giving the audience a sense that there is hope for them yet.

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<sup>31</sup> The action of holding hands is very pervasive in the anime: Hanabi’s memories with Narumi have them holding hands, denoting their innocent bond; Hanabi holding Sanae’s hand the first time they met to give comfort; the several times Hanabi and Mugi held hands in an effort to be emotionally close. This particular action portrays the innocence of the emotions behind it, something the sexual body cannot recreate.

<sup>32</sup> Hanabi has tears in her eyes while Mugi does not. Her body continues to be the most expressive as she grapples with the realization that she deeply cares for Mugi but abuses others’ feelings.

Maybe the violent cycle can end once and for all. Maybe they will not use their bodies for sly reasons anymore.

The confessions are ruined immediately once Mugi brings Hanabi to his room, kissing frantically. Hanabi sits with her back against the door. Mugi thinks, “She’s pretty. It makes me want to ruin her” (Episode 5, 13:47). The image here is so powerful, because her eyes are crossed out and the black ink spots over the screen, ruining Hanabi’s innocence and



her body. It goes so well with the next thing Mugi says: “I know that’s where my mind goes because I’m a man” (Episode 5, 13:50). Why do we want to ruin women, or innocent things in general?<sup>33</sup> Why can we not let them be? We impose our will onto them for control, but it does nothing other than bolster the ego and continue to distort our view of ourselves, our desires, and the world. Mugi goes on to say, “Even I have things I want to keep closed off from the world,” giving off the impression that he does all of this to avoid the things he is hiding from coming out into the light, to avoid...being human and flawed (Episode 5, 14:08).

The episode then switches to Akane’s perspective. She is on a date with Narumi, and she finds him quite boring for the most part. Suddenly, Narumi slips and accidentally calls her by Hanabi’s pet name. That immediately changes Akane’s opinion of him, because the second she realizes that Narumi is not totally in her grip like she so effortlessly thought is when he catches

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<sup>33</sup> This is heavily reflected in fan media today. Every time there is an anime with empowering heroines, fan artists always draw pornography of them: “[These fighting girl characters, like Sailor Moon] help sell pornographic stories that are even spicier [than the original content]” (Akita 49). It demonstrates that sex sells to those who want to keep the male gaze alive.

her interest after all. Through this scene, Akane is aware that the slip does not indicate that he actually likes Hanabi, as he says that it was done out of habit, but now that she knows that Hanabi is on his mind often enough makes it that much more fun to steal him away. Akane narrates, “I take it all back. This boring day might have just gotten interesting,” licking her lips in anticipation (Episode 5, 16:26). This game-changing knowledge leads Akane to kiss him to lure



him back into her trap.

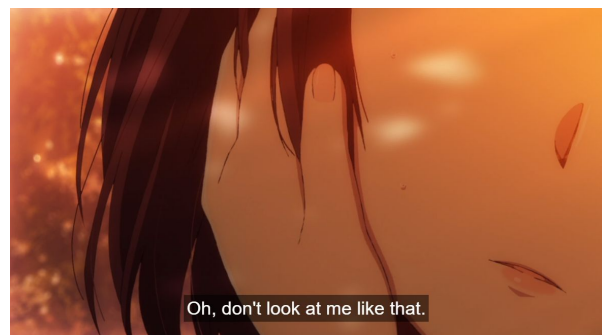
The kiss switches back to Mugi and Hanabi, going through the similar motions of physical comfort. However, this time they want to have sex together and are slowly taking off each other's clothes. Mugi finds a

hickey on Hanabi's neck, showing Sanae's possession over her and his consequent jealousy, making him give Hanabi his own hickey as an act of dominating possession. Other than that, this scene is classic innocent couple wanting to have their first time and it is slow and almost loving, letting the audience think that the pair's deceit is coming to a close.

In the end, though, they do not go through with the act of penetration. Hanabi does not state why she wants to stop, but the audience can assume that she still holds onto the hope of having her first time with Narumi. Hanabi changing her mind and halting sexual intercourse bothers Mugi. He spurns her, telling her, “It's because you don't really love me, right?” (Episode 5, 19:32). Saying this is incredibly manipulative, revealing that he equates sex with love, which is harmful to both of their egos. There is speculation that maybe they do love each other, seen in the several times they think of each other throughout the series, but only focusing on what the

body can do in a sexual context hurts both of them. Mugi feels pushed aside for Narumi, and Hanabi feels guilty for being scared. There is such a thick barrier between them that gets harder to traverse everyday due to these kinds of words and actions. In response, Hanabi, eyes shrouded, decides to put her clothes back on. Mugi belatedly realizes that he said the wrong thing and reaches out to grab her wrist. It possibly is a plea for her to stay so they can fix things and become emotionally close, but his next words do not match his intent: “Are you a virgin?” which causes her to leave (Episode 5, 20:12). One of the final shots of the episode is Hanabi in her bed, moping, as she tells the audience, “Being alone makes me feel empty” (Episode 5, 20:45). It would be so much easier for her to just stop using people’s bodies for her own fantasy to stop feeling empty. Maybe then she would not be alone. Her words signal that Hanabi is back to spiraling and goes back into the violent cycle to regain the affection and validation that she lost.

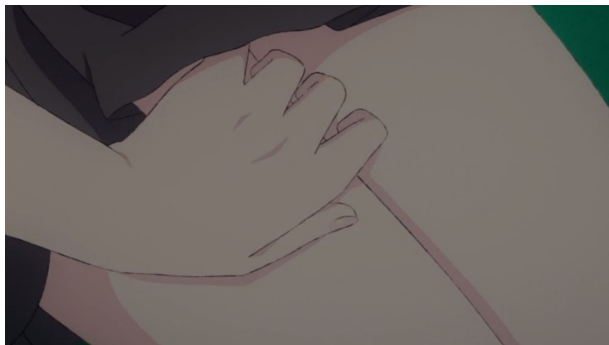
The sixth episode increases in chaos, as everyone is using the body for their own gain. It starts off with Hanabi admitting that that she is willing to hurt someone to win Akane’s game because she needs some physical affection or else she will continue to feel empty. It is so disheartening to see that a young girl is pinning all of her self-worth on an adult woman and her actions to win a rigged game. Hanabi’s thoughts of, “I know I’m just going to become empty inside” tell the audience that her usage of the body is to avoid any human connection because she is afraid of rejection, of feeling inferior, and losing herself in the ecstasy lets her get away from it all (Episode 6, 3:41). The episode then shows a scene between Hanabi and Sanae in a park, where Sanae calls all of the shots. She



dictates when and how Hanabi receives her touch, even though Hanabi repeatedly rejects her, specifically saying, “I won’t see you after school alone anymore” (Episode 6, 5:54). Hanabi’s words express how afraid she is to be with Sanae now, how afraid she is to lose control of her body again. Sanae maintains her control on Hanabi’s body throughout the scene, telling the audience that her usage of the body is just to feel wanted by the one person she has ever loved, even if she herself will get thrown away in the end. Nothing matters as long as she can satisfy her loved one’s distorted desires.

Of course, this makes Hanabi regret the decision she has made, giving Sanae her body, because now Sanae assumes that she can touch Hanabi anytime, anywhere, like in the library scene: Sanae follows Hanabi and her friend to the library where they were trying to study. Sanae gives a sunny smile, making Hanabi and the audience initially think, “She’s trying to act normal for me,” that maybe Sanae genuinely cares about Hanabi’s sense of mind (Episode 6, 7:32).

Instead, Sanae sees this moment in the library as the perfect opportunity to play with Hanabi’s



genitals, making the scene highly uncomfortable for the viewer, given that this was a public space. Sanae also never asks to touch Hanabi in that manner, only whispering, “We can do it at school, though, right?” (Episode 6, 7:42).<sup>34</sup>

Sanae twists Hanabi’s earlier assertion to suit her and forces Hanabi to comply, lest they bring attention onto them. Soon after Sanae violates Hanabi, they are both in the nurse’s office, where

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<sup>34</sup> Note that Hanabi is always on the receiving end of sexual pleasure, discounting the handjob from episode three. She is complicit in what happens because it gets her what she needs, but she is always the passive one, making one wonder, when will she be the one to initiate? When she actually feels real love?

Hanabi rests in bed because she fainted. Hanabi fainted because she cannot even handle being conscious of Sanae's touch on her body. Sanae sits next to her, the picture of a caring friend, but all of her actions ooze ill will in the way she plays with Hanabi's hair, meanwhile thinking, "I want to watch you get filled with darkness and accept who you really are, but I will always want you no matter what,"<sup>35</sup> making it clear that Sanae's feelings for Hanabi are unhealthy and controlling, harming Hanabi's autonomy.

The scene switches to Hanabi and her hopeless search to find another replacement in Terauchi, since Mugi is unavailable and Sanae is keeping her in chains. In a brief scene where Terauchi asks Hanabi to say what she wants, Hanabi narrates, "I lock up my real feelings and hide them deep inside to make sure nobody ever finds out" (Episode 6, 14:22). She is so afraid of opening up, because in the real world, Japanese people are treated as selfish once they talk about their feelings and are punished for not sticking to the social harmony of *wa*. Why do we hide behind fake smiles and winks and all sorts of sexual connotations just to feel alive? At least Hanabi is able to say this to herself, have this moment of clarity before she closes up again.<sup>36</sup> She backtracks and does not verbalize this to Terauchi, instead saying something tame and less polarizing. She says that her issue is related to feelings, to which he replies, "If the body feels good, then all the emotional stuff will come later," sounding like a deep repression on various levels (Episode 6, 14:58). This relates to how Japanese society is seen as sexually repressed,

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<sup>35</sup> My rendering of her thoughts.

<sup>36</sup> This is also seen in episode seven, where Hanabi blindly chases Terauchi again while refusing to disclose her feelings. She wants others to give her everything but won't give anything herself, which is the problem. It leads her to realize that her distorted desires have led her away from her original goal; it changed from doing physical things for love to doing it for lust, making things even less real and unattainable.

unable to say their true desires and hiding behind sexual images in order to function in the public sphere.

The episode ends with Noriko approaching Mugi, where she tells him that Hanabi does not truly want him. Mugi thinks to himself, “You’re always so honest and unexciting” (Episode 6, 20:05). Why is honesty unattractive? It is mentioned here that “if a woman does not say ‘stop, help, don’t!’ then her desire becomes overexposed...the performance of resistance thus momentarily masquerades sexual desire, a tension-creating device meant to incite desire” (Shigematsu 143-144). This tells the audience that women are meant to play games to stir desire. If everyone is always honest, then the mystery is gone. There is nothing to drive a man’s sex. Mugi thinking this makes it apparent that Noriko was supposed to be coy, just like Akane, just like Hanabi, and it is part of why he is not attracted to her. Noriko tries so hard to be innocent, that her illusion of cuteness does not beckon him; her perceived honesty does not either. A certain amount of tension is needed for love to be forbidden, to make it tantalizing, and without it, Mugi will not look at Noriko the way she wants him to.

Emotions are treated as a performance to sex, since no one wants to hear the naked truth in their words during sex. No one wants to hear heartfelt passion, but they like the performance because it enhances the sexual act, pretending that they are really in love and this actually means something. These characters heavily rely on that tactic to survive. Once all the feelings are known, then there is no fog, no fun. In a society where it is too tempting to hide constantly, these characters do not know what real love is, because they do not want it; they would rather have their fantasy, even though it ruins them. Mugi also narrates to Noriko’s crying face, “Don’t cry now. I’m not the Prince Charming from your fantasies,” breaking down her imposed desires on



him, as it will eventually ruin her, just as his fantasies ruined him sexually and emotionally (Episode 6, 20:37).

Episode seven is the beginning of the downfall for a number of the cast, as well as one that delves more into



Noriko's personality. It opens up with Noriko dressing up for her date with Mugi. One of the first things she says is, "I want to look the prettiest ever in my life. I'm doing it partly for him. But mostly for myself. I want to do it for myself" (Episode 7, 1:55). Noriko's words dance well with, "Liberated from gravity, and apparently unconcerned with any male gaze, the dancers seem both sexual and powerful in their own uniquely female realm" (Napier 69). This particular quote is addressing two female dancers in traditional clothing in a pornographic anime, but it applies to Noriko, since she dons her best self for no one else's gaze. She is dancing within her feminine sphere that men cannot traverse, dancing for someone who will not accept the image she wants to portray. Because Mugi will not look at her, Noriko has to do her ritual for her personal enjoyment, and it is beginning to be too late for her to want to change her mind, as she is too deep in the façade to dare reveal her normal self again, leading for the date to feel a little forced, as Noriko is caught up in finally living out her fantasy.<sup>37</sup>

Towards the end of the date, Noriko verbally confesses her feelings for Mugi, even though her feelings have been evident for a very long time. Mugi is moved and kisses her. The

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<sup>37</sup> The all-important hand hold is shown once again at 7:40, demonstrating her innocent want for intimacy. Yet something feels off. It might be that Noriko holds his hand for show to strengthen her fantasy. Yet Mugi reciprocated. Was it out of pity? Something in his intentions feels off.



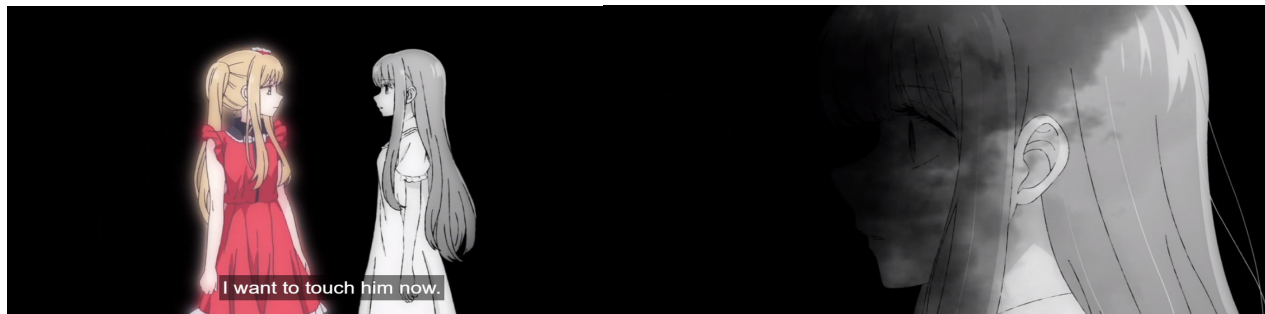
scene switches over to both of them on Mugi's bed, where Noriko plays hard to get in order to seem more desirable and innocent. There are close-up shots of Noriko's body, which seems odd, as the reason for the erotic has not been

presented yet. But when she narrates, "I pretend I don't know. Even though I do," the floodgates of her true self open (Episode 7, 12:54). There are flashbacks of her childhood with Mugi and her excessive crying to get him to agree with her wishes, as she narrates, "I always knew. I've always been given a pass. There wasn't an adult that didn't cave when I cried. I did already know. That I wasn't a pure and innocent princess that you'd find in books," paired with the image of her sticking out her tongue at those she has fooled, including the audience (Episode 7, 14:30). Noriko explicitly tells the audience what they have suspected all along: her attire, her mannerisms, her entire personality is an act. She uses her imposed perception of herself to satisfy her desires. However, she has become sexually repressed and needs to break out of her cute sphere in order to touch Mugi.



At the same exact time she makes advances at him, the inner cute Noriko, perceived as real Noriko's consciousness, steps in to prevent outer Noriko from crossing a line, using phrases such as, "If you do this now, then how are you different from all the other people supposedly in

love?” (Episode 7, 15:09).<sup>38</sup> Inner Noriko sees through the acts other people in relationships around her do and the attempts to gain power. She sees other people not genuinely in love but go through the acts of love because of physical and societal satisfaction. Inner Noriko tries to reason with outer Noriko, but at this point though, outer Noriko does not care, shown with the black ink bleeding over cute Noriko. But one has to wonder, which Noriko is the real one? Is it the cute



one who knows from right and wrong? Or the one who desperately needs to feel a warm touch?

It is arguable that these two sides of her are one and the same. Noriko possibly was a genuinely good person who loved Mugi, but years of being locked up in the image she presents have

eroded that innocence and drove her to crave sexual intimacy. She wants Mugi to see her as someone older and more desirable and sees sex as the path to finally attain Mugi’s love. Noriko spent all this time pushing towards the world



the thought that she is a thing that can be seen but not touched, and now the time has come for her to break out of that bubble, disregarding her own feelings and that Mugi does not love her

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<sup>38</sup> Note that while cute Noriko is reprimanding her, outer Noriko’s eyes are shrouded, repressing her emotions to satisfy the body’s cravings.

back.<sup>39</sup> Noriko is a bit reminiscent of Sanae, as they both want to be with the one they love most, even knowing that they will be thrown away in the end. Determined, Noriko and Mugi kiss, but both of their eyes are not seen, further obscuring their turbulent emotions. A little later, Noriko feels that Mugi is about to pull away, but she pushes on, guilting him into giving her physical affection.

Noriko only wants to exist as the *rorikon* dream, seen in her thoughts of, “I can live on because I’m cute,” because she knows that someone will always love the innocence she projects and she will always use it for her own gain (Episode 7, 16:37). She is spoiled and will take all the attention she can cultivate, which is how she is currently using her body to get Mugi to want her. Even though the entire time Noriko asserts that she loves Mugi, it does not ring true in her statement of, “I don’t need his answer,” because she just wants to live out her fantasy of being



with a prince, and Mugi perfectly fits the image (Episode 7, 16:43). Right then, Mugi falls into her trap and he begins to fondle her body, bringing the erotic to the forefront.<sup>40</sup> In knowing that he does not care for Noriko in that way, Mugi uses her for his

own destructive reasons to avoid confronting his feelings for either Noriko or Hanabi and because he has nowhere else to go. But, at the last second, he realizes what he is doing and stops. Mugi makes it sound like stopping was for a selfish thing, but he knows that he should not take away Noriko’s adolescence in the ways Mei took it from him and he took it from Hanabi.

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<sup>39</sup> This relates to Chii from *Chobits*, where she “is a thing to be owned, [and] the idea is to assure that Chii is not to be ‘used’ sexually,” demonstrating that real women should not be touched (Lamarre 239).

<sup>40</sup> At the same time though, Noriko’s eyes are shown to be expressive, tearing up, making the scene a little more tender.

There is another layer to his reasoning, and it is him wanting to continue treating her like a caged bird who cannot be damaged. Due to their childhood friendship and Noriko's perceived image of "special," Mugi will not intrude on her glass cage, because to him, she should only be seen and not touched because she is too perfect, too innocent. In episode ten, Mugi delves into this moment and admits to the audience that he was using Noriko. He hated making her say that she loves him, even though they both have been aware of her feelings for years. He hated that he used her in the first place because of sentimental value of their past and considered violating that to fill his void. He hated that part of him was turned on by that and briefly reveled in it before he backed off. Mugi seeing Noriko as "special" gives him reason to want to transgress that boundary and violate her body, just how he wanted to violate Hanabi's body in episode five. Even though Mugi's conscience got the better of him, a part of him still wanted to break that glass cage for his perverse desires before going back to just admiring Noriko's image. This line of thinking is what irrefutably destroys their relationship.

Episode eight introduces Sanae's cousin, named Atsuya. He is a minor character for the latter half of the series, and it can be argued that he is only there to serve as the male gaze upon Sanae's sexuality, since he is in love with her. He consistently keeps his hair long because it is heavily implied that he cannot handle being seen or directly look at the person he loves, as he says, "Crap, our eyes met," and Sanae replies, "Your hair is always so long. Why don't you cut it?" (Episode 8, 3:33). He is exactly like Noriko and Sanae in not minding in being the other person, as long as he receives some form of Sanae's affection. There is a scene at the beginning between the two cousins, where Atsuya casts doubt on her feelings for Hanabi, suggesting that Sanae only likes her because Hanabi is a girl and joking that Sanae is pursuing her to make him

jealous with the statement of, “Then that still means I have a chance” (Episode 8, 6:54). Atsuya means well, but he does not know the situation and the fact that he has the audacity to joke about Sanae using Hanabi’s feelings to gain his attention removes Sanae’s autonomy and feelings in the matter. This thought process correlates to real life, where men are constantly “suggesting that women behave sexually with one another only for the seduction of men,” which removes Sanae’s autonomy (Gillotti 38). There are many times women kiss each other to obtain a man’s attention in media, arousing the man and making him wish those sexual advances were towards him instead (Boesveld, National Post.com). Sexual assertions on the woman’s part have to be subtle to continue the cat-and-mouse game, and makes any same-sex love seem like another fantasy for men’s eyes and therefore invalid. Even though Sanae’s and Hanabi’s relationship is imbalanced, neither of them are interacting for another man’s attention, keeping Atsuya from crossing the threshold of their female realm.

Later in the episode, Mugi meets with Akane so he can confess his feelings for her and verbally get rejected, per his promise with Hanabi at the end of the previous episode. He knows what kind of person Akane is, but beats around the bush because her voice, her hair, the way she leans in towards him is too tempting. At the same time, he wonders about her preferences in a male partner, only to realize that he cannot guess. This suggests that Akane does not care about the man’s body or personality, as long as someone wants him and he wants her. This is all part of her game to ruin people’s feelings, therefore anyone would do and she can embrace their desires. The next thing the viewer sees is Mugi pushing Akane onto a bed in a love motel, yelling, “I know that you’re a horrible, broken, promiscuous narcissist!” and calling her out on her actions (Episode 8, 17:28). He has laid it all to bare with his assertion, and Akane smirks in response.

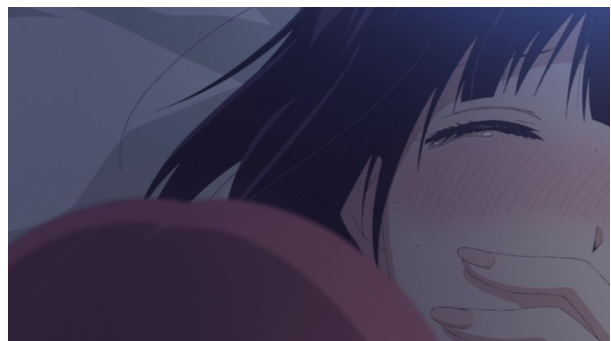
Mugi could have left that bed, that room, but he does not. He thinks to himself, “I’m aware of this imbalance of power” and begins to undress her (Episode 8, 18:10). He knows deep down that he could never truly resist Akane; after knowing all of her sins, he still wants to be involved in her sex life.

Thinking back to the roles of the comic voyeur and the demon in pornographic anime, Mugi is stuck between both: he is a high schooler, who normally would be too young to actually have sexual relations with his teacher, so he has to be the comic voyeur. But he actively wants to be the demon, able to penetrate his teacher sexually and emotionally. His indecision and limited mobility, coupled with Akane’s grandmaster tactics, lead to this imbalance of power. She tips the situation in her favor in order to have all the power to play with people and it is especially damaging to Mugi’s ego. Even now, Mugi is aware his feelings for Hanabi are real and valid, but his feelings for Akane weigh so much more solely because of their history. Akane nonchalantly uses her body to get Mugi to fall into her trap, aware of this power imbalance and revels in it. How else could she live? She is so used to using her body to deceive others, that she does not know how to be honest or selflessly give up power.

Akane’s and Mugi’s sexual relations are juxtaposed with Hanabi’s confession to Narumi. Immediately their interactions seem much more pure and emotionally vulnerable. Their relationship is so easy, because they both genuinely love each other, giving a strong foundation to their relationship. Hanabi and Narumi deeply know each other and there is so much weight behind their actions because of that. There does not need to be anything more than each other’s presence; no sex, no sexual fondling will ever compare to the times they have held hands, or just held each other, understanding everything in silence. This is told most clearly when they hug at

the end of the scene, and Hanabi narrates, “He holds me like he isn’t going to let go” (Episode 8, 20:39). They do not have to go through the body to convey their feelings the way Hanabi and the rest of the cast do, because there is nothing to hide anymore. Once the emotions are fulfilled and told, then the body also reaches its satisfaction, making Hanabi and Narumi stand out as the most emotionally stable pair in the sea of capricious people in the anime. They demonstrate that it is possible to leave the violent cycle of deception and be honest to attain a sense of happiness and closure.

Hanabi and Sanae go on a short vacation to Karuizawa in episode nine. Sanae is taking this opportunity to force physical contact with her under the pretenses of being a normal couple. Right when they arrive, Sanae forcibly holds Hanabi’s hand. Compared to the times Hanabi and Narumi held hands, Sanae’s action feels paper-thin. She is attempting to recreate the innocence Hanabi and Narumi have, but it is too late, now that Sanae has already taken Hanabi’s body. Yet Sanae wants to keep up an illusion and will look for any excuse to do it and any excuse to keep Hanabi from complaining, telling her that no one knows them here, therefore no one will judge their same-sex love. That night, Sanae begins using Hanabi’s body with an iron-clad control once again, and Hanabi stays complicit. Hanabi gave up her body once, and has had it taken from her every time since, rendering their relationship to be destructive and purely superficial. They do not talk about their emotions anymore. They do not do talk about their dreams for the future. They do not do anything other than Sanae using Hanabi’s body under the guise of pleasuring her. Every time Sanae touches her, Hanabi’s





eyes are filled with tears. Hanabi cannot take this sort of contact anymore and Sanae refuses to see that. As mentioned earlier, Hanabi is always the one shown going through ecstasy in sexual scenes, and the focus is always on her body instead of the face of her partner. It does not make any sense. If the relationship was truly mutual, then both bodies would be shown, or at least the partner's eyes. Making the scene feel pornographic reduces the emotions involved and commodifies Hanabi's body. This is a real issue in Japanese society with *rorikon* readers and sexualizing girls' bodies:

*Rorikon* readers do not (desire to) identify with being strong men attacking women and girls. In contrast, Akagi asserts that *rorikon manga* facilitates a reversal of gender positions in the processes of identification. Akagi argues that the readers of *rorikon* manga do not identify with the pleasure that the attacker or penis-substitute is gaining, but are caught up with the 'young girl's ecstasy.' The focus on the young girl's ecstasy enables and encourages identifications with the girl...the reader can then envisage and elaborate upon fantasies of masochistic pleasure...*rorikon* solicits the reader to identify with the sex-object who is forcibly taken to ecstasy (Shigematsu 131).

The readers do not want to see the partner because they want to *embody* the partner. The partner is obstructing the view from the girl's orgasm. The readers want to feel as if they are the ones bringing the girl to ecstasy. Given that Hanabi wants to feel emotions, close-ups of her body feel odd and erase her initial desires and make her a pin-up doll. This quote only applies to Hanabi and Noriko, as they are the cute heroines that the male audience would want to see. Noriko best fits the *rorikon* image and Hanabi has the most expressive body. Yet Akane and Mei are never seen in the throes of ecstasy, and it does not matter. Akane and Mei are the mature women a man would not care about pleasuring as much. They are not as vulnerable as Hanabi and Noriko, thus seeing them in the midst of an orgasm is not as titillating.

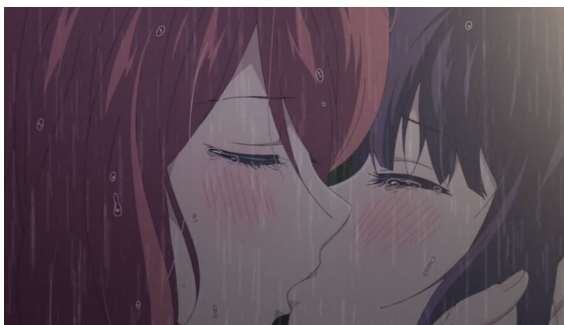
The focus on only Hanabi's body is reflected in Sanae's words: "Even after touching her, falling in love with her, I've chosen to be alone" (Episode 9, 8:12). This exposes the split between Hanabi's physical pleasure and Sanae's psychological pleasure. Sanae wants to be alone and does not want her distorted desires to be seen. Sanae's words reveal to be dangerous. She implies she is alone because she chooses to be, but she is alone because she does not ask for consent. She takes Hanabi's autonomy and rationalizes it by saying, "What's wrong with choosing my own ending?" (Episode 9, 8:20). If infringing on Hanabi's body means that Sanae gets to choose her own ending, then Sanae does not see her own delusion. She cannot impose her will on her best friend and still think this is acceptable. Sanae needs to face the ramifications of her actions. In saying that, Sanae avoids asking herself if it is okay and to realize that she is grossly using Hanabi. If choosing her own ending means hurting the one she loves most, then she never loved Hanabi in the first place. She cannot touch Hanabi without asking and still say that they are making beautiful memories here.

Hanabi also does not help, as there are moments where she romanticizes what is happening and ignoring that it is not reflective of her friendship and her morals, saying, "Please, for now, nobody put a label on this feeling" (Episode 9, 12:09). She tries to make it seem like a normal same-sex relationship when the audience knows that is not true. Her sentiments are similar to prewar girl's culture in Japan; then, "girls' culture was premised on the privacy of a homosocial world, but while the relationships between girls were often described using the language of love, those relationships were part of the transitory adolescent state and did not imply a lesbian persona" (Shamoon 33). This partially explains both why Sanae's sexual identity is not explored and the refusal to label their relationship once it became physical. If girls in

prewar Japan were not allowed to indulge their homosexual emotions past adolescence, then girls now cannot easily admit their feelings when they reach adulthood either. In prewar Japan, same-sex love in this transitory state was called S-relationships, and it was deemed the deepest bond two girls could ever have without crossing the boundary into lesbian love (Shamoon 35). These types of relationships are created to be a safe space for girls to figure out their emotions before moving on to heterosexual relationships in adulthood.

Because of the assumption that both parties will move on to a heterosexual marriage, these S-relationships emulate a heterosexual one. The older of the pair takes on the more aggressive role of the man in pursuing the younger in the pair, perfectly exemplifying Sanae and Hanabi. Before Sanae gave into temptation, it is possible that their friendship was supposed to be a thinly-veiled S-relationship. Same-sex love is meant to be a phase, something never to be discussed again, and in modern day it only serves the purpose to entice the male audience. Hanabi saying “Nobody put a label on this feeling” is her putting on the rose-colored glasses and making it seem more innocent and pure than it actually is. Calling it something outside of deep friendship transgresses boundaries that society does not want to see.

At the end of the episode, Hanabi finally speaks up of her problems with Sanae. After yelling and saying hurtful things and talking it out, they both come together for a fateful hug.



When they hug, that intimacy means so much more than the kissing, touching, and licking they have done before. Once true emotions are involved, it all comes out and they come closer together than any sexual relations. The body tries to imitate love

without knowing it, but it will always feel fake or gossamer-thin compared to the real force of emotions behind a genuine kiss or hug. So when Hanabi and Sanae kiss at the end, that is the first time they both desired it, and that means everything.

The opening scene in episode ten is Akane telling Mugi to call her “Sensei” while they are in the midst of having sex.<sup>41</sup> This scene does nothing but further tip the power imbalance into her favor, because calling her “Sensei” makes it more apparent that this is a forbidden relationship and further strips Mugi of his mobility. Akane blatantly uses her body to seduce Mugi for her distorted sense of fun; she has nothing to gain other than the satisfaction of keeping this boy under her thumb. In episode nine, Hanabi imagines Akane telling her, “He wants to be tricked. All men do,” and it shows in this opening scene (Episode 9, 00:56). Mugi is willing to call Akane “Sensei” for a sense of heightened danger. Japanese men in reality want to feel as if things are happening in their favor when really it is not. Because of their attachment to the internet, they do not quite see the complexities of Japanese women, seen with the herbivore men and the lack of interaction with the opposite gender.

At the same time that they are having sex, Akane talks about her first time. It was in high school and her partner was a senior whom everyone admired. But the way she talks about it feels very detached. There was not much emotion involved and the boy was not a first love, nor was it implied that this was experimentation. It



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<sup>41</sup> “Sensei” is teacher in Japanese.

was just an attractive senior taking her body and Akane went along with it. Note how Akane's expressive face is clearly seen as they have sex. This is the first time the audience sees her actually experience physical pleasure, her moans and flushing body filling the screen. Right then,

Akane narrates, "And while enjoying my 10, 3:11). This signals Akane is enjoying her her mind is

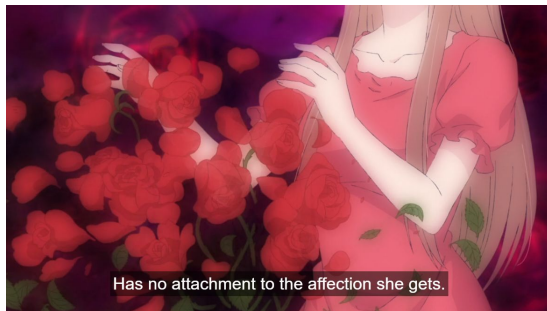


I would be loved. All own worth" (Episode that even though first time physically, somewhere else. It

seems as if the sex was only performed for Akane to confirm that she is wanted sexually over other women.

Her next words back up this thought process as she says, "I want to take all of their jealousy. And pile it all up so I can line them up, look at them, play with them, stomp on them" (Episode 10, 3:27). The emotions associated with her first time do not matter as much as the satisfaction that she got to this senior boy first before everyone else, all the while playing with others' emotions. She momentarily questions herself as to why she does this, and her answer is, "This is the only way I know" (Episode 10, 5:54). This demonstrates that Akane is lost in herself; she does not know why, she just does because it is all she thinks she is good for. Yet doing these things satisfy her distorted desires of playing at God, seen in the way that she willingly presses herself against Mugi in bed. Her pressing against Mugi denote that she successfully uses her body to deceive Mugi and her attachment to continuing the cycle of deceiving others so she can be perceived as the most wanted.

Meanwhile, Mugi is under the impression that he is changing her, getting her to feel genuine emotions. That is exactly what Akane wants him to think, because she knows he is where she wants him, no matter how much he struggles. She gives the illusion that he is changing her, all to satisfy her ego as she snickers in her head. This reinforces the earlier notion from episode nine that all men want to be tricked. Mugi is aware of some level that he is playing into her game, but ultimately does not care, as it gets him his temporary fantasy of being with the one he loves. Akane knows and it loves it, seen in her words of, “I’ll shatter your world. I’m so kind. Even if you don’t want to know, you can’t help it because we’re so similar” (Episode 10, 5:21). It is disturbing to see a grown woman play with a boy’s feelings who is significantly



younger than her, because like Mei, she should know better. But morals do not quite matter as much as achieving her desires. All throughout these scenes, inner Akane is seen with roses, either holding a bouquet, or petals falling around her, or her stepping on them. The rose typically means love or passion, but inner Akane either throws the bouquet off to the side or steps on the petals, displaying that she sees love as invalid and demeaning and looks down on anyone who actually believes in it. There is a moment where inner Mugi is also shown with her, rose petals falling over both of them. It looks like a wall or a curtain, keeping them apart. Through this, Mugi sees that Akane has fake passion. He says, “She doesn’t turn anyone away, but does not chase after



those who leave” (Episode 10, 9:20). In a way, this shows how much self-respect she has for herself. She respects herself enough to know when her time with someone is over and will not foolishly chase them. This may also be her keeping in line with her outward persona. She has to be cool and confident until the end because that is what her image prescribes, thus letting her deceive others for her own gain.

This active repression for her persona is repeated again at the end of her date with Narumi. They encounter Terauchi with a new girl and he calls out Akane to Narumi, saying, “She’s a real slut that loves men. I’d be careful if I were you” (Episode 10, 14:00). In her mind, Akane punches Terauchi, which is her true desire. In that moment, Akane’s affected voice drops. The audience gets a quick peek to Akane’s real self without the high-pitched voice and cute demeanor.<sup>42</sup>



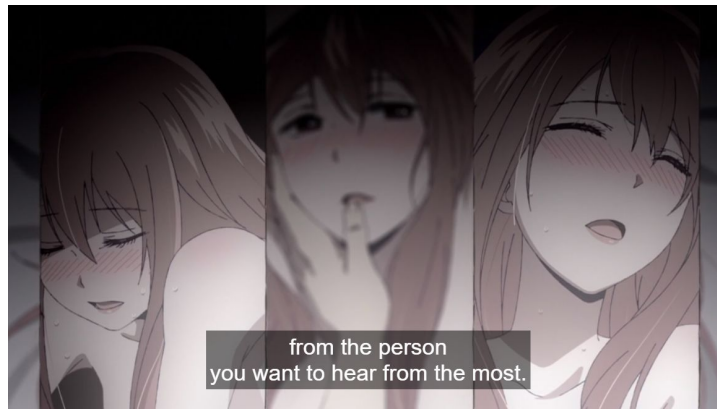
But in the end she thinks, “I can’t do that. That’s not part of my character” (Episode 10, 13:54). Instead, she says nothing and lets Terauchi leave. Her body represses her true desires to keep up a façade. How fulfilling can that be? If no one can ever see who she truly is, how will Akane ever learn what love is? Akane would rather want power over genuine love, as the audience has seen back in episode four that love gets her nowhere.

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<sup>42</sup> Akane’s affected voice adds to her charm, but it is strange that Akane, a grown woman, needs to do that to seem desirable. It is actually quite common in Japanese society that young women are infantilizing themselves to seem cute, with the cute baby voices, fondling one’s clothes, rounded handwriting, increased “cute” slang such as, “I like English xx2” (Akita 45); Akane also straddles the line between cute and sexy—cute because it grants her initial power over the men she encounters, and sexy because she then uses her body to express that she has the ideal body. Hanabi, her adversary, considers her evil.

Later, Akane is back with Mugi, having sex again. Mugi narrates, “You will never get the words you want to hear the most from the person you want to hear from the most,” while the background is images of Akane moaning (Episode 10, 17:59). This is the second and last time

Akane is shown to pleasure. Those with Mugi’s Mugi is having an while Akane’s grand time. Mugi



be having images conflict words, because emotional crisis body is having a has to repress his

feelings to serve Akane’s needs, to make her orgasm. They can never do anything further than sex, because neither of them are looking to open up to each other in an emotional way and come together in mutual understanding. That would disturb the power imbalance, and Akane loves it too much to want to even out the scales.

Episode eleven encompasses Akane’s special day with Narumi. It immediately starts with the words, “I want more. So shiny and beautiful. People’s thoughts and feelings. Desire. I want to collect all the colors and blur the lines between them” (Episode 11, 00:07). Right from the beginning, the viewer sees more of Akane’s distorted desire, which is to see others’ distorted desires out in the open, all while she hides her own. She wants to transgress boundaries and watch other people feel ashamed and confused. Because of this, she willfully offers up her body to see all types of people and play with their feelings that she deems colorful. This is her usage of the body, and it is disturbing. She only wants to create chaos for no reason other than to entertain her and as she watches in sadistic delight the ways people are flawed as she hides her own



manipulative tendencies in public. Akane continues her monologue with, “I always try to cross the line with everything. If I had to say I was suited for it, I’m probably not” (Episode 11, 00:54). That does not make any sense. She says she is not suited for it, but she has been doing this since her middle school days because she noticed the thrill of taking someone else’s man. She even mentions several times that she was born this way, so saying that she is not suited for it contradicts her entire personality. If she was not suited for this, then why does she do it?

Added to this, Akane says, “Making someone special cross their line, the pleasant feeling of having your own eroded...I’m sure I was never meant to feel them” (Episode 11, 1:35). As she expresses through her monologue, Akane loves the idea of eroding physical boundaries,



of playing with someone so much to make them cross a line because she does not have her own, seeing what kind of person they become when that happens, signaling to sociopathic tendencies and lack of empathy.

Akane makes it unclear whether it feels as if she is deceiving herself or if she is stating conflicting facts about herself, because while she is saying all of this, in the background is all the times she has slept with someone and blurred the



lines of what a relationship means. Note that in every single frame, her partner’s face is not seen.

Now that Narumi knows the truth about her, Akane forgoes her affected voice for the

most part and instead wants to know why he still likes her. Narumi cannot explain why, suggesting that he is meant to be a plot device to demonstrate that unconditional love is real and can be attainable.<sup>43</sup> It also ignores that Narumi is too attached to both the memories of his deceased mother and Akane's long hair. Narumi is the embodiment of the deep love and care that Akane has never known.<sup>44</sup> Narumi is a bit too accepting of Akane's behavior, as he says, "You do it because you like it, don't you? You don't have to stop then," making Akane's destructive actions look like a hobby (Episode 11, 9:54). It is possible that they are both moved to be sentimental, as the scene is awash with the pale moonlight streaming through their dark room, and Akane is shown to tear up for the first and only time, thinking, "I didn't know it could feel so good. I can't believe it. I finally feel connected" (Episode 11, 13:48). The next day, Narumi proclaims that he loves her, eventually asking her to marry him. Akane is thrown off, but accepts and tells him that she is going to continue her behavior, which Narumi is perfectly okay with. He cares more that she accepted than her affirmation that she will continue to sleep around and manipulate others. This showcases that he would rather give up his self-worth to nurture Akane's, yet does that not erase his identity? His wants?

Meanwhile, Mugi has a flashback to his time with Akane, where she said, "When I die, I don't want to be remembered by anyone" (Episode 11, 17:02).<sup>45</sup> Mugi does not focus on that comment as much as he delves into a deep analysis on Akane, saying that she clings onto roles so she can be freed from her boredom. That is precisely true; Akane clings to the patriarchy and

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<sup>43</sup> Who is most likely to give unconditional love? A mother. This speaks to Narumi's attachment to his mother and his role as a parental figure for Akane.

<sup>44</sup> It is evident throughout the episode that Narumi has some sort of distorted desire of motherly care, but on a much lesser scale than everyone else, and he is willing to repress himself for those he loves. He is the stereotypical Japanese man who is willing to keep the group harmony by sacrificing his true wants.

<sup>45</sup> Why does she say that? Is she that accepting of her fate as a marginalized person?

societal rules because there is nothing else for her outside of that. Just like a real woman in society, Akane is trapped in her female role and can never rise to do anything else, be anything else. She has the ideal mature body, yes, but nothing about her is substantial. No one knows what she likes or who she is outside of those roles. Her entire personality is dependent on a man, driving home that she is the perfect subservient woman. Her acting upon her secret desires in ways that look acceptable is part of her usage of the body.

Later, Akane tells Mugi that she is getting married to Narumi, and Mugi has conflicting feelings about it. He says that she is finally doing something for herself, that “she wasn’t a sad, lonely woman trying to define herself through a man. That’s because she looked so beautiful trying to set out on her own after finally been given a name and shape” (Episode 11, 18:59). I argue that she is still doing it through a man and she is still bored. It is true that marriage is new for Akane, a person who never thought she would be tied down, so it is a new way to find out who she is, but she is ignoring that she will be further trapped in her role as a woman, because a housewife cannot do the things she is doing, nor can she work anymore, nor can she really leave the house. Akane accepts Narumi’s marriage proposal for the sole reason that she cannot let go of the one who almost got away. At the same time, Mugi reveals his inner distorted desires because he realizes he never really wanted Akane to change—he just wanted to keep her all to himself like a hoarder. How can one want their first love to change? If they change, then everything you believed in with those rose-colored glasses falls apart, and you cannot have that. Back in episode eight, Mugi said, “I liked her because I could never have her,” further treating Akane like a caged bird (Episode 8, 16:50): Mugi he did not want Akane to be her own person,

he just wanted to project his issues onto her and get the sense that he is changing her and she is all his, but Akane cannot be trapped in that glass cage forever.<sup>46</sup>

The ending of episode eleven brings up the interesting image of a sexually active male. Mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, men in Japanese society are sexually repressed and that “the truly remarkable lack of conventional, sexually active males hints that sexual activity and identity are still not integrated into regular life in Japan” (Napier 80). *Scum's Wish* discards that idea, because the viewer frequently sees sexually active males in Mugi and Terauchi.<sup>47</sup> Granted, Mugi at least is only active because a woman took it upon herself to drive him into the sexual territory. But both Mugi and Terauchi are portrayed as sexually frustrated and crave a woman's body, seen when Hanabi turns down their advances. The idea that “the sexual male's combination of frustration and desperate need for control underlines once again the paucity of sexual identities available to the Japanese male” highlights how in pornographic anime the sexual male is a projection of men's sexual desires because they cannot act upon it in real life (Napier 80-81). In *Scum's Wish*, all of the male cast, except Atsuya, are able to act upon their desires and reach an orgasm, but none of them genuinely care if Akane does, illustrating Akane's role as a hypersexualized woman complacent in sexual acts. She is similar to Mei in the hypersexuality, but unlike Mei, Akane never actively instigates any acts. She waits for the man to initiate and enjoys the ease that she can get men to do anything to please her, but will not openly express her desires, going back to the Shigematsu quote from episode six. Because if she

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<sup>46</sup> If Mugi is torn between the comic voyeur and the demon, then Narumi is definitely the comic voyeur. He does not want to participate in changing Akane's life because he is more than happy to just watch from afar. Narumi does not want to intrude on Akane's caged space and be able to idolize her as his mother.

<sup>47</sup> Narumi and Atsuya are the typical sexually repressed Japanese man. Narumi generally does not look for sex from Akane, although they do end up having sex twice. Atsuya is simply waiting for Sanae to notice him.

does, then her illusion disappears and she loses her power, and Akane cannot lose it. Being coy lets her retain her sexual influence. But the drawback is that men will just love the fantasy she can give them and not her real self, which then leads to men pleasuring themselves with her body rather than mutually pleasuring each other, physically and emotionally.

### **Concluding *Scum's Wish* and Repercussions**

Episode twelve opens up with shots of autumn, signifying that things are changing and dying as we are at the last episode, contrasted with the cherry blossoms at the beginning.<sup>48</sup> Throughout, there are flashbacks to everyone is gearing up for the school festival. During this, the pinky swear image resurfaces, but this time Hanabi does it with Narumi instead of Mugi, promising that she will be at Narumi's wedding. This pinky swear indicates the changing feelings of adolescence. Hanabi encounters various characters in the present, Sanae with her newly cut hair, Noriko and her epitome of cuteness, the engaged couple Narumi and Akane. Hanabi finds Mugi last in a storage room, told through a flashback. After weeks of avoiding each other, they begin to talk of their feelings. Hanabi narrates, "It turns out that the promise we made that day, the time we spent together, had no meaning in the end" (Episode 12, 16:55). This is all very introspective, but for an anime, it feels off to have this grand story fall apart with no meaning. Generally, anime resolve the conflicts with a nice bow and a few lingering questions for the audience that feel satisfying. In *Scum's Wish*, the grand story was built up on so many levels, but to let things fizzle out is lacking in plot strength. Did the audience truly learn

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<sup>48</sup> There is another shot of the water bottle Mugi and Hanabi used to drink together crumpled up and in the trash, denoting that their relationship has been crushed to the point of no return.

anything? How can relationships of any kind be sustainable, if we just brush those memories to the side?

Hanabi continues to say, “For the first time, we avoided physical comfort and tried using our words instead,” which is what they were supposed to do once things got more complicated (Episode 12, 18:56). At least they found the courage to confront their feelings upfront instead of beating around the bush by seducing others and themselves to get a



temporary high. The viewer does not miss that while they are getting their emotions out in the open, Mugi has his hand on the ground between them, but Hanabi does not take the bait. It is suspected that that is the last beam of hope on Mugi's end to maybe have a real blooming relationship with Hanabi, but possibly one that is still rooted in physical comfort. If so, Hanabi



not taking the bait means that she does not want that anymore and wants to live without any deception in a toxic relationship.

For the first time, they are not shown to kiss, but the viewer only sees their bodies close

together in what looks like a hug before they part, their pinkies the last thing they hold onto. The final shot of the series is Mugi and Hanabi walking in different directions and turning back to



look at the other who is not there. Hanabi narrates, “We are looking for real love. That’s why we continue to live on,” but it implies that they will never cross paths again (Episode 12, 21:17). The audience is left with an unsatisfactory ending. Cutting each other off is a little too harsh after everything they have been through, but it is also understandable that they need to be apart. Hanabi and Mugi cannot be together romantically because they both know too much about the ugly and toxic parts of each other, thus a genuine relationship cannot work at this point. But they love each other to some extent, given their words of, “I don’t want to *be apart*. I don’t want to *let go anymore*. I want to hold you. *I don’t want things to end*. Don’t let me go. *I don’t want it to end*. But goodbye” and reluctance to let go of their final hug (Episode 12, 20:53).<sup>49</sup> They do not want to let go, but also know that if they stay together, they will continue to go around in that vicious circle and never get anywhere.

That may be true for a romantic relationship, but is the friendship also so broken that they cannot reconnect again? Sanae and Hanabi are able to become friends again in the finale. Are Hanabi and Mugi so afraid to have a chance to start the cycle again if they continue to be in each other’s lives? Considering they have the ability to be petty, manipulative, possessive, it was probably a situation of the same charge repelling each other. But if both Hanabi and Mugi ignore each other, then they cannot address their history together and thus cannot actually learn from their mistakes. It is clear that this is going to take a lot of healing, as several things fell apart for no real reason. The audience can hope that one day Hanabi and Mugi are able to come together

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<sup>49</sup> Hanabi and Mugi are completing each other’s sentences in this moment, illustrating how well they still know each other, even now. The italicized parts are Hanabi, the normal font Mugi. The final goodbye is said in unison.

again in some way, but for now, they need to take the consequences of what they have done into consideration and relearn how to be people capable of adapting and loving again.

In the end, their usage of the body in these deceptive ways has led to ruin, but there is enough standing to rebuild again one day with others who genuinely care and are there for the other types of comfort, not just sexual. There is only so much the body can take without the mind feeling confused and violated, because yes it feels good, but does it *feel* good? Both mind and body must be in harmony, just like the social harmony *wa*. Being vulnerable emotionally and physically is part of living a stable life, and if there is an uneven balance between the two things, then everything falls apart. This show's portrayal of disharmony conveys the message that the body is not an isolated thing; there are so many other things attached that people generally do not want to think about, and therefore use the body for their own pleasure without thinking about the ramifications and push other people to self-destruct. Because really, using the body like this is a form of self-destruction, as the audience has seen in these twelve episodes.

If "Japanese women's subjectivities are circumscribed, constructed, represented, and recrafted aesthetically through material culture" (Akita 52), it makes sense that the female characters feel as if they are not in control of their bodies and why they are stuck in the cycle of wanting to break out but still be accepted in Japanese society. They use their bodies and the male body to feel good and throw aside their mental stability for ephemeral satisfaction. This is why Akane and Noriko can only perform within their cute sphere, lest the society in the show finds the truth about them and their illusion and casts them out as unwanted women. Hanabi and Sanae do not have such a sphere, but they are still feminine and Sanae abuses that to take Hanabi's body so other men do not want Hanabi, recalling the hickey Sanae left on Hanabi's neck in



episode five. Everyone on some level is aware that these ideals are oppressive, but they all like the pleasure of being objectified too much to really question the logistics of this harmful cycle.

### Concluding Remarks

I have never experienced a work quite like *Scum's Wish*, an anime that plays with the body and untold emotions in an aesthetically pleasing art style. Anime as a medium has generated countless tales of perseverance in the face of increasing conflict, and this particular anime lets things fall apart and lets the characters live on in flux, the audience never knowing what their paths are afterwards. This work closely resembles real life in the ways the characters interact in trying to play mind games, trying to fall in love knowing there is much more outside of high school and there is so much emotional injustice and lies. This resemblance gives the audience pleasure but also discomfort in showing the ugly sides of people that have nothing to do with saving the world or getting the romantic interest. Sometimes people are manipulative, scared, hopeful and hopeless, and confused. In trying to attain the perfect perception of themselves through deception, people fall apart. Not everything can be clean-cut and beautiful. *Scum's Wish* hits you where it hurts, messing with preconceived expectations of what the arc would become with gorgeous animation that is juxtaposed with ugly characters who continue to strive for something that feels real.

In the multitude of works in the medium that are seen as escapist, *Scum's Wish* challenges that. In calling this medium escapist, it gives the idea that anime and manga's "representations of the unreal...do not accurately reflect our temporality, social experience, or what humans looks like, what exists and who or what is given subjectivity, sexuality, power, and agency" (Shigematsu 132). Yet *Scum's Wish* holds up a mirror to the audience's distorted desires, making them see for themselves that neither the medium and reality can be perfect, no matter how much they strive for the fantasy. Seeing realistic characters is sobering, because it

gives the audience a chance to rethink their distorted perceptions. Even though the anime's end is bittersweet, the audience can be hopeful for themselves in finding authentic connections.

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